

Chosen or Not?

A Layman's Study of Biblical Election and Assurance

Doug Sayers

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To Luke Michael

And to his wonderful mother, Julie

And to his brother Aaron

And to his sisters Sandra and Katie

**It is with a large lump in my throat
That I thank God for each one of you.**

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1.0 Questions about Children and Their Destinies

Funerals are not easy. Funeral services for children can be excruciating, even for Christians. They always raise some questions. Have you ever wondered why many Christians assume that children are lost, and need to be saved, but the same Christians always assume that children, who die, will go to heaven? If you have, then you might find this book interesting. This never made sense to me. They must not *really* think that children are lost, or they should conclude that children must perish if they die before receiving the gospel.

I have also found it confusing when some preachers tell us that there is nothing we can do to be saved from our sin, but then they proceed to tell us what we must do to be saved from our sin.

I would bet that you have also wrestled with the question of the eternal destiny of those who never get to hear the gospel of Christ. Millions of people have lived and died without hearing the name of Jesus. Should we assume that God has not chosen these people to be forgiven of their sins? Or, should we assume that they will be forgiven because Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world?

Perhaps you have struggled with the question of your own assurance of salvation, or the assurance of someone you love. I hope this book will help with that issue, as well. While we are at it, we may as well tackle the longstanding, and related, question of whether it is possible for someone, who believed the gospel of Christ, to fall away from the faith, and end up in misery. However, there is some ground we will have to cover before we get there.

The original title of this book was going to be “*So, if I’m not Really a Calvinist-Do I Have to be an Arminian?*” I liked that title because it captured the spirit in which I hoped it would be written. However, it would probably be a little too long. It also might misrepresent the *biblical* emphasis. This book is not an angry rant nor is it a dreary history book about a couple of guys who lived in the sixteenth century and disagreed on some difficult points of theology and philosophy.

This book is about understanding what the Bible teaches concerning original sin, election to salvation, God’s righteousness and love, our faith, and the assurance of salvation. They are important subjects, which are vitally related to one another. I

trust the reader will quickly see how that Bible doctrine is very relevant and practical in our day-to-day lives.

1.1 TWO PASTORS VISIT THE MATERNITY WARD

A simple illustration to get things started would be to imagine the scene at a hospital room with the proud parents of a brand-new baby. It's their first child. It was a long labor. The new mother is exhausted and she is happy to be finally finished with pregnancy, labor, and delivery. The baby is fine. No sign of any problems. Dad is there (thankfully) and proud as can be, with the usual big dreams of glory and a little fear over all the new responsibility. Hopefully, from this moment on, he will be a little more grown up, because fatherhood is a man's job.

Two pastors will come to visit them in the hospital. (The reason there were two pastors is a long story and irrelevant to our discussion. Not to worry though . . . it's all friendly.)

The first pastor who visits our young family believes that the child has been born as a guilty sinner and the child's eternal destiny (heaven or hell) has already been decided by God. He believes that God not only foresees the child's eternal destiny, but *He* has already decided what it will be. Either the child has been chosen by God for salvation from sin, or he will be left to perish in hell for being a sinner. The outcome can't be altered. This pastor calls it the doctrine of "unconditional election" and it drives his entire understanding of Christian salvation. Nevertheless, he will also teach that salvation has a required "condition" that must be met by the sinner. He teaches that the condition is repentance and faith in the truth of God, and Jesus is the Truth. If the new baby is not chosen for salvation, then he could never become a believer because God will not give him the ability to repent and trust the gospel. God would have sovereignly decided not to save him. This pastor teaches that salvation comes by *irresistible* grace. It is an offer that can't be refused . . . by the chosen sinners.

A little later, the second pastor comes to visit. He believes that the child has been born a sinner, but isn't guilty of any sins . . . yet. This pastor *does not* believe that the child's eternal destiny (heaven or hell) has already been irreversibly predestined by God. This pastor teaches that if the child grows normally into adulthood, he will play an independent and crucial role in his own eternal destiny. Both heaven and hell are still

actual possibilities, even though God may already know the outcome. He says that God truly *wishes* this new baby to eventually join Him in heaven, but He has not *decreed* it. He teaches that God sovereignly refuses to force His desire on any adult who does not want to meet the condition of salvation. This pastor believes that God has predestined the terms and conditions of the plan of salvation. He insists that the plan requires a necessary condition, which must be *independently* met by the sinner. He agrees that the condition is humble faith in the truth of God, and Jesus is the Truth. This pastor says that God equips every sinner, of sound mind, with the ability to repent and believe the truth, but no one is irresistibly compelled to repent and believe the truth. This pastor teaches that salvation comes by grace . . . but not *irresistible* grace. It is a universal offer that can be refused by anyone.

Well, there you have it. That pretty much sums up the most practical essence of the controversy. I hope that was clear. I hope you can grasp the basic differences within this longstanding debate. To be sure, there is much contained below the surface of these brief summaries. Nevertheless, I hope you can agree that the basic differences are not very hard to understand.

You might be tempted to assume that laymen should not write books on theological debates, but you don't need to be a scholar to see the basic differences in the two positions on election. You may think this book is an amateurish attempt to solve a complex theological problem, but this really does sum up the most practical essence of the disagreement. We don't need a lot of big words, Latin phrases, complex logical syllogisms, and long sentences to state the basic differences. At its core, the disagreement is pretty simple.

One pastor teaches that before you were born, your eternal destiny was already predetermined, and it can't be altered. The other pastor says it wasn't. One says that salvation is irresistible in every essential aspect, and the other says that anyone can resist being saved. Both pastors may agree that our final destiny could be known by God ahead of time, but this does not necessarily mean that God directly and irresistibly causes the outcome.

No doubt, you were expecting a little more detail and explanation. We certainly will zoom in and examine the two positions much more closely. But you could close this book right now, and you would know the bottom-line essentials of the whole disagreement. If you decide to

read on, then you will see that the rest of this book will be a gradual expansion and repetitive explanation of these two basic interpretations. (To those who find themselves struggling, at first, to grasp the issues: don't give up. Keep reading. There will be ample repetition of the most salient points. This will be tedious for some, but it will be helpful for others.) The first half of the book will continue to develop the main issues of the debate, and should not be too difficult to follow. If you are brand new to the debate then you should be sure to read Chapter 3. It will explain some of the terminology. The last half of the book will go into more depth on the most critical aspects of the debate. As you can see in the Scripture Index, many Scripture texts will be considered. We will finish with a look into the inevitable question of assurance.

We should note that there are Bible texts, which can be interpreted to support each pastor's position. From here on, we will expand on the two views. We will see how both sides defend their position from scripture. First, we need to lay some more groundwork.

To get the most out of this book you will need a working knowledge of the Bible. You do not need to know much about John Calvin or Jacobus Arminius. You may already know that Calvin was a French theologian and a leader of the Protestant Reformation. He lived from 1509 to 1564. Arminius was a Dutch theologian who lived from 1560 to 1609. If you do the math then you can see that Arminius was about four years old when Calvin died, so they never actually debated each other. (If they had debated, it wouldn't have been a very fair fight. Maybe if Calvin was four and Arminius was an adult it would have been a fairer fight.)

The dispute actually goes back much further in the history of the Christian Church. These disagreements can be found as far back as Augustine and two other men who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries (Pelagius and Cassianus). Thus, this is a very old debate, which just hasn't gone away.

The debate includes the study of the doctrines of *election* and *predestination*, which are taught in the Bible. If you are like many Christians, the words *elect* and *predestined* are terms that you may have just skipped by as you read your Bible. You were probably hoping to move on to something that would be easier to understand and more applicable to your everyday life. The terms election and predestination can be somewhat puzzling, if not troubling. They are often considered too lofty and impractical for the average believer. They don't appear to

be very useful in developing our faith and attaining a healthy and joyful assurance. You may think these concepts are only for theologians and wannabe theologians in seminaries. You may be thinking:

I'm just an average Christian and I want to be sure that my family, friends, and I are each reconciled to God, and useful in the everyday work of His kingdom. I don't care too much about deep theological stuff. I just need to know God better.

Or you may even be thinking:

Who cares what some ancient theologians thought about some abstract points of theology? I really don't want to argue about what God was thinking to Himself before He made the heavens and the earth. Give me some stuff I can use to put off the old man and put on the new. I'm struggling with real life doubts and sins. My kids, or grandkids, are being bombarded with all kinds of ungodly influences; I need some teaching that will help us keep the faith.

If this is what you are thinking, then you make a valid point. But you may be surprised to know the amount of subtle influence that your understanding of election is having on your life right now. Your understanding of God's predestinating purposes has a profound effect on your understanding of His sovereign control of all things, and our human responsibility. Both are important. **This book will try to help us understand how God exercises His sovereign control of all things, and yet, how God sovereignly restrains His control, delegates authority, and holds us responsible for our conduct and our attitudes.**

As students of Scripture, we must guard against pitting one attribute of God against another. It is easy to emphasize God's love and mercy to the neglect of His sovereignty and wrath. Likewise, we must not emphasize the sovereignty and omniscience of God so much that we besmirch His righteousness and love. We can fall off doctrinal horses on either side.

We certainly don't need a seminary degree to deduce that if God is truly all-powerful then He could have prevented mankind's fall into sin. He obviously did not prevent the entrance of sin, and that is an

undeniable example of how God restrains His sovereign control over every detail of human life. The fall of mankind, and the ongoing trouble with sin, is proof positive that Almighty God does not want to manipulate every decision we make. Or, it would mean that God is not holy or all-powerful. If a personal judgment is coming for each one of us then this is certainly important material.

We will primarily be looking into the question of God's sovereignty in the context of our salvation from sin, and its consequences. It may be old fashioned to believe in hell but that is no reason to reject its existence. Cancer and crime are old fashioned but denying them doesn't make them any less real. Denying the final judgment does not mean that it won't happen. Sin is obviously a problem in every culture on the planet. It makes sense that we need to be reconciled to our Creator.

We sometimes hear people on both sides of our debate say, "It must be my destiny" regarding a watershed issue in their lives. Yet, if we assume that God irresistibly manipulates everything of eternal importance then it will inevitably have an effect on our decisions and conduct. A truly fatalistic view of life could be a fatal mistake. We might end up standing before God on the Judgment Day finding out that we were responsible for some things that we did not expect, and our eternal destiny could actually weigh in the balance. We should not assume that we couldn't be held accountable for doing something simply because we found it difficult.

We will all likely find out that God's grace was sufficient for a lot more faith and obedience than we thought. Included in your faith, right now, is some degree of understanding of what God completely manipulates, and what He sovereignly refuses to manipulate, and therefore what He expects of adults, teenagers, children, and infants.

When our kids were growing up, they played a little game called "Where's Waldo." Waldo was a cartoon character who would be drawn in several places inside of a larger landscape or mural. You might see the game on the back of a cereal box. The object of the game was for the child (or adult, if you eat the cereals that I like) to locate all the places where Waldo was to be found. I am sure the game has some developmental benefit . . . at least for kids. In our study, we will be undertaking a similar exercise in a more serious context. Instead of looking for Waldo, we will be looking for "irresistible" in the Bible. **As we examine many texts of Scripture, we will be trying to decide if the concept of irresistible grace is necessarily taught in the**

context of salvation. The term “irresistible grace” is not in the Bible. If it was then this whole issue might be easier. However, we do find places in Scripture (and life) where God’s grace is irresistible. It cannot be avoided or rejected. But we will need to discover if, and how, they might be applied in the context of our salvation.

1.2 WHAT’S IN A NAME?

As you probably know, our first pastor’s views have come to be called ‘Calvinistic.’ They are named after John Calvin, the aforementioned 16th century theologian. He, following the lead of Martin Luther, was one of the key figures in the Protestant Reformation; so the position is also known as the ‘Reformed’ view. This view was first put forth by Augustine and so it is also called ‘Augustinian.’ There is one convenience in this debate. Historically, Calvinistic teachers are generally consistent with one another on the essentials of the issue. Their explanations, however, will vary from surprisingly simple to quite complex.

One of the best arguments for the Calvinistic system is the list of theologians who taught it. It is a very impressive list. (Speaking from personal experience, I’m convinced that many who call themselves Calvinists have given in to an intellectual peer pressure. They are not entirely sure about all of the implications of the Reformed view, but they wouldn’t want to be found opposing the intimidating list of scholars and theologians who teach it.)

There has been, historically, some variance in emphasis and presentation among Reformed (aka: Calvinistic) teachers on the various aspects of the debate. Nevertheless, there has been general agreement on the substance of it. It is the minority view among Evangelical Protestants today, and throughout Church history. Nevertheless, the majority of the best-known Christian theologians throughout church history have held the Calvinistic view. **We may use all three terms: Calvinistic, Reformed, and Augustinian to describe the same position.** For simplicity’s sake, most of the time we will just refer to the position as Calvinistic or Calvinism. (It singles him out unfairly but he’s used to it.)

The view of our second pastor is a little more difficult to name than the first view, because there is some real variety on this side of

the debate. Many on this side of the debate are not in strict agreement on every issue. They can be all over the place in terms of their overall biblical convictions over the various aspects of this question (and many other issues, as well). There aren't as many well-known theologians associated with it. Our "non-Calvinist" has been called Arminian, or the more derogative, Semi-Pelagian. Sometimes their view is called a moderate or hybrid kind of Calvinism. Many on this side of the debate will lightheartedly call themselves "Calminians". There is some variance in each of these positions so we won't worry about trying to name them. Most of the names given to either side were probably coined by their followers or their opponents. It would be unfair to assume that these men wanted their names to be substituted for what they believed was biblical truth. But distinctions have to be made. Woe to those who make none. Perhaps when finished, we can find the biblical position.

In this study, we will primarily be calling one side "Calvinists" and the other side "non-Calvinists."

1.3 WHY A LAYMAN'S PERSPECTIVE?

There have been many other books written on this subject that detail the two basic positions on election. Many that I have read (or tried to read) seem to be written by scholars and theologians for other scholars and theologians. The rest of us are often left out. It is one reason that the whole issue tends to stay in seminaries. I hope to be able to take a rather complex (and sometimes vexing) subject and explain it in terms that the average believer might be able to follow and use. My lack of formal theological training might actually prove to be helpful. Although I have never been a pastor, I have around 37 years of experience in listening to (and reading) pastors' messages. (Both Calvinist and non-Calvinist.)

I have no reputation to protect and my income does not depend on my position on the doctrines of grace. My wife and I own a very small business. Most of our customers don't seem to care too much about my views on predestination. Therefore, I should be able to be fairly objective, in terms of vocational consequences. I am confident that my wife, kids, and grandkids will love me even if I make a fool of myself by trying to run with the big dogs.

Some theological teachers (on both sides of our debate) avoid using illustrations like Superman avoids kryptonite. I'm sure they have their reasons, but illustrations really help the average person to understand doctrine. As you know, Jesus used them often. He likened deep spiritual matters unto building a house, raising kids, farming, eating, warfare, and the weather. These are all issues that virtually every person, in every culture, can relate to . . . and always will. Doctrines that can't be illustrated should generally be viewed with suspicion. They may prove to be mere speculation and theory.

We often see this debate defined by introducing the, so-called, “5 points of Calvinism”, and off we go. In this study, I have tried to go about it somewhat differently. As shown in the illustration of the new baby and the two pastors, I want the reader to see and feel the differences in a very practical context. I am not interested in bringing in a hundred quotes from umpteen different theologians (and bloggers) on the topic. The quotes in this book are from fairly well known and respected Bible teachers . . . both old and new. I think the most difficult parts to read in this book will be the quotes from the Westminster Confession of Faith. Do not try to read them quickly. The people who wrote the Confession may have had an allergy to short simple sentences. I suppose I understand why, but sometimes I wonder if they really wanted the average believer to know what they were saying. This tends to be found more often among Reformed writers. (In his book on the death of Christ, John Owen begins a chapter with *one sentence* that is over 260 words long.¹ This does not necessarily mean he was trying to impress, or hide behind complex sentences, but it does look that way.)

Again, I have tried to focus on biblical texts. Some philosophy is inescapable and both sides of our argument should be prepared to admit it. When Martin Luther made his famous “Here I Stand” defense, before the Roman Catholic authorities, he said that he would need to be convinced from Scripture or evident reason before he would recant. Likewise, this question involves both Scripture and evident reason. Most of the quotes in this book are used to present the Calvinistic view on key aspects of the debate. Excessive quotes may indicate how many books someone has read (or how well they can navigate search engines) but they can also be a distraction. They often get us sidetracked into an argument about whether the quote is being properly used. I personally have grown tired of seeing writings on this subject site a myriad of

quotes by a long list of men who made no claims of divine inspiration. We won't waste time arguing whether John Calvin was a "Calvinist" or not. It doesn't really matter.

1.4 LED ZEPPELIN AND WORDS WITH MULTIPLE MEANINGS

Those of you that are near my age will remember the very popular 1970's song by Led Zeppelin entitled "Stairway to Heaven." (You don't have to admit that you still like it . . . but we know you do.) In that song, the writers, Jimmy Page and Robert Plant, acknowledged a deficiency in virtually all language. One line says:

There's a sign on the wall, but she wants to be sure, cuz you know sometimes words have two meanings.²

They were right. We encounter these double meanings quite often. When I say "glasses," some of you think of eyeglasses and some of you probably think of drinking glasses. Bible words are no exception. Words like work, seek, dead, flesh, baptize, day, world, and draw can have different meanings in different contexts. Even the words saved, righteous, and justified are words that have different meanings in different contexts, in the Bible. This has caused no small amount of controversy trying to sort them out in the context of this debate, and in others. Other words like irresistible, unpreventable, can't, bound, free, and able, all are words that also have a variety and range of meanings.

Sometimes we use the term "fat chance" to describe the same thing as a "slim chance". In the vernacular, a "wise man" is not the same as a "wise guy". There must be no doubt that much of the friction over the question of biblical election has been due to this problem in language. Some of us lack the verbal dexterity required to be as precise as needed. Some are too lazy to be clear, and some actually take advantage of the double meaning to advance their case. (Maybe they have too much verbal dexterity. They should be in sales . . . or be lawyers.)

Some may say that this whole debate is a war of words. They will suggest that it is a debate over the definitions of terms like "freewill" and "original sin." When all is said and done, you may be inclined to agree. I want to reiterate that this book is primarily intended for

the average believer. Often the words used by scholars in theology are some real whoppers. I don't think they are always used to carnally impress, intimidate, or obscure. They can be useful in distinguishing various points of understanding, but I will leave most of them for the trained theologians. (I doubt that I know them all anyway.) This writing is for the rest of us.

Laymen take heart. Terms like counterfactual, Supralapsarianism, ontological creatureliness, syntactical relationships, and perspicuity will not be mentioned again. I'm afraid there are some Bible teachers who claim that they want to reach the average person, but end up writing with a style and vocabulary which suggests they really wanted to address (or impress) their colleagues in academia. That last term, "perspicuity," always cracks me up. Especially when it is used by writers who claim they want to be clear and plain in their teaching. (In case you didn't know, perspicuity means clear or plain.)

The longer we study the Bible the more we realize how vital it is that we stay as close as possible to the inspired language of scripture. It would be a sizeable understatement to suggest that God superintended the words of scripture very carefully. He knows our limitations *and* our appetite for knowledge that is beyond what He has revealed. When we start paraphrasing Scripture, and reading too much between the lines we can get in trouble. This problem may be at the core of the debate over election. Only those who know the Bible very well can get away with certain mistakes in interpreting it.

My admiration for the Puritans and their writings runs deep. They were brilliant men who likely possessed the vocabulary of today's "scholars" by the time they were teenagers. We are told that Jonathan Edwards went to Yale when he was 13 years old and he graduated at 17. (At 17, I spent much of my time hitting golf balls or driving around town listening to the Doobie Brothers on my sweet 8-track player.) This writing is primarily intended for the average believer who finds these issues perplexing.

1.5 BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND THE PURPOSE OF MANKIND

If we are Bible believers, then we agree that when it comes down to the nitty gritty we must have biblical support for our doctrinal positions. I don't care who I might agree with, or disagree with, on

any particular doctrine, as long as I believe it to be biblical. It doesn't matter if we happen to agree with Calvin, Luther, Pelagius, Finney, Carl Sagan, or Oprah Winfrey; truth is truth. We will not be playing the "wrong by association" game of biblical debate. The Bible is our final rule for faith and practice, and it doesn't matter if we agree on a certain point of doctrine with the Three Stooges or Homer Simpson. If it is true, then it is true. If you believe the doctrine of the virgin birth and practice infant baptism, that does not make you a Roman Catholic. Likewise, if you believe that independent moral ability is required for a just moral judgment that does not make you a Pelagian. We will try to avoid the games some people play in the debate.

This book, if it is written and understood properly, will speak to the absolute trustworthiness of God. I can't think of anything that is more important to developing a rock solid faith than having full confidence in the honesty of God. Having faith in the love of God and His promises of mercy is naïve and foolish, if He can't be trusted. If the LORD (YHWH) is not completely honest then He is not God and any assurance of salvation is an impossible dream. This book is primarily for Christian believers who have been on the journey long enough to want to tackle the longstanding dispute over the biblical doctrines of grace. It is for those who want to have a better understanding of what the dispute is all about. It should also be helpful for those who have already taken a side.

One desire I have for this book is that it might help the reader to understand, and articulate, what you believe about the sovereignty of God in all things, not just salvation. There is plenty of mystery in these things but we must avoid the polar extremes of error that cause much damage and needlessly divide us.

Again, I hope you will see that this book is not an angry attack on John Calvin or Calvinists. As a former deacon of a Reformed Baptist church, I was a convinced Calvinist for years. (I could produce witnesses.) My favorite Bible teachers are Calvinistic. I simply hope to point out the flaws and show what, I believe, is the biblical understanding of salvation by grace. Make no mistake; I will be critical of the Calvinistic view and its teachers. Nevertheless, if you try to paint this book as a fountain of angry vitriol then you will have born false witness to its content. Keep your "big boy" pants on. When we engage in honest debate, we should be prepared to take some hits as well as give them.

I believe it was Vance Havner, who said that every Christian should maintain the heart of a child and the hide of a rhinoceros. That is never more applicable than in the debate over election and assurance.

Ironically, the reformed doctrines of predestination fly in the face of the old Westminster Catechism's wonderful answer to the question about the “chief end of man.” According to the Catechism, the chief purpose of mankind is “to glorify God and *enjoy* Him forever.” I take that to mean everyone . . . Esau, Pharaoh, Jezebel, Hitler, and Hugh Hefner included. Surely, God, in a meaningful sense, desired each of them to know Him and enjoy Him forever. They were all children once, and Jesus expressed a universal love for children. I am confident that sending a stubborn sinner to hell will glorify God’s just wrath, but I doubt that anyone made in the image of God will *enjoy* Him there.

So, is the Catechism wrong? Did God fail in His chief purpose for those who perish; or did He sovereignly permit men to violate, reject, and (in a limited sense) frustrate His will? Perhaps the authors of the Catechism meant to say that the chief purpose of the *elect* is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. How could they mean every person, if some people perish, and God *alone* is responsible for any sinner’s salvation? Those who perish will certainly not enjoy God forever. On the other hand, if it is God’s will for every person to be saved, then why isn’t every person saved? Is God not capable of bringing His desired will to pass? How could sinful creatures overrule the will of their Creator? These questions are at the heart of our study.

1.6 A FEW MORE PERTINENT QUESTIONS

Lastly, by way of introduction, here are a few more questions that we will try to answer in this study:

- 1) How can the biblical salvation be all of grace and yet have a condition which must be met by the individual sinner alone?
- 2) When a small child sins (or behaves badly) who is to blame? Whom does God hold accountable?

- 3) Can you look any man, woman, or child in the eye and tell them, on the authority of God's word, that Jesus died for their sins, and God actually desires their salvation?
- 4) If you have ever wondered, "What's in it for God?" then I hope this book is helpful. That question is not pondered enough.

I have tried to be lighthearted when I can. I mean no disrespect to the subject matter, especially as it relates to the character of God and the essentials of the gospel. It would be impossible to take God and His truth too seriously, but it is possible to take ourselves too seriously. It is often done in this debate . . . and in others.

I realize that, for many, we are trying to answer questions that they don't even have. I want to encourage you to take a thoughtful approach to the questions. You will be better for it. The repetition is there for a reason. I have tried to be concise and exclude needless detail and repetition. But frequent repetition is essential in this debate. Also, I know how these books are often read. There tends to be a lot of jumping around from topic to topic. Readers do not always start at the beginning and read straight through.

All right, that will have to be enough introduction for now. Let's get started breaking down the essence of the issue. Please keep in mind that you are holding an abridged version of the original manuscript. If you have ever engaged in a thorough discussion of the doctrines of election then you can appreciate how it could spawn a very large book. That being said, this book will give you an adequate summary of the basic components of the questions about grace. I think there is enough here to help you answer the question of whether the biblical salvation is all of grace . . . or all of irresistible grace.

(Author's Note: Please accept my apologies for any typing, punctuation, and grammatical mistakes that were not corrected. My inexperience as a writer may already be obvious, but the expense of more editing could not be justified. I'm not very experienced with split infinitives, incomplete comparisons, non-standard questions, and passive voices. I'm beginning to think that the rules of writing are more intimidating than the whole subject of predestination.)

2.0 Defining the Debate with the New Baby

Let's return to the hospital and probe a little deeper into the two pastors' views. We need to see where they agree and disagree, as it relates to the debate. This should help keep the blood pressure down and show that this really is a debate between genuine believers.

2.1 THE FIRST PASTOR SAYS

Our first pastor (the Calvinist) believes the child is born in sin because of Adam's sin in the Garden. He teaches that God has judged the child already and he has essentially been found guilty of Adam's sin. Therefore, God would be justified if He does not make a plan of salvation for him. He would have had his chance, as it were, in Adam. He believes that the child's eternal destiny has already been individually and irreversibly predestined by God. He believes that it must be, because the Bible teaches that God is sovereign and salvation comes by irresistible grace . . . alone. God not only *foresees* the child's eternal destiny, but He has decided what that destiny will be. The soul of every person will go to heaven via Jesus, or hell via Adam. The divine decision cannot be changed. Regardless of whether the child lives to be over 100, or dies in childhood, if that soul has been chosen by God for salvation, then he *will* go to heaven. **The notion of an “age of accountability” would be irrelevant to the Calvinistic pastor in the context of salvation.** This is because God would have already decided who will be forgiven *before* we reach any age.

Oddly enough, our Calvinistic pastor will still suggest that salvation has a necessary human requirement attached to it. (The requirement is repentance and faith.) “Nuanced” Calvinists will even insist that the requirement must be met, voluntarily, by the sinner’s free will. But they may stutter a little when doing so; as this is probably the most crucial and difficult distinction in the whole debate. As we will see, the multiple definitions of the term “free will” are at the heart of our controversy. This pastor teaches that no one born in sin can have saving faith unless God gives that ability to him or her . . . *irresistibly*.

Our Calvinistic pastor also believes that if the child is *not chosen* by God for salvation then he will inevitably perish in hell. He cannot possibly go to heaven. **This pastor teaches that there is no plan of**

salvation for the baby if he is not one of the chosen. The new baby would obviously never have a bona fide opportunity to be elect . . . if he was not already elect.

This pastor believes that no power in heaven or earth can alter the predetermined outcome. Even God can't change the outcome. It is not that God lacks the power but He is utterly committed to it. He will never want to change His decision. This pastor is quite sure that he has a handle on how the omniscience of God must operate in these things. There are no true options left for any newborn baby, in his understanding of salvation. In this pastor's view of God's omniscience, there is no such thing as a "plan B." He teaches that God could never actually alter His plans from one righteous option to another, yet he will still insist that God is sovereign. God's decision regarding the baby's eternal destiny would have been made before time, and it would stand for eternity.

This pastor sites texts of Scripture in **John 6**, where Jesus said that no one can come to Him unless the Father draws him, in **Romans 9** where Paul quotes the Old Testament concerning God's love for Jacob and His hatred for Esau, and in **Ephesians 1-2** where Paul speaks of election, predestination, and he describes our lost condition as "dead in trespasses and sins." He will use many other texts of Scripture, as well.

2.2 THE SECOND PASTOR SAYS

Our second pastor (the non-Calvinist) also believes that the child is born in sin because of Adam's sin in the Garden, but the child is not born *guilty* of Adam's sin. The baby suffers the consequences of Adam's sin but not the actual blame. He will independently choose to sin on his own, eventually, and then be held culpable for those sins. He maintains that the child's eternal destiny has *not* already been individually, unconditionally, and irreversibly predestined by God. He agrees that heaven and hell are the only two eternal destinies that are possible but he maintains that they are both, somehow, still viable possibilities. He teaches that God genuinely desires every child to be saved and has made the necessary provision for his/her salvation. The eternal outcome will actually be determined during the child's lifetime.

This pastor is less confident of his understanding of God's omniscience. Like the first pastor, he also believes that humble faith is a necessary requirement for salvation. However, he believes that faith is a condition, which must be met *independently*, by the common grace of God. It would not require a supernatural miracle, from God, to believe in Jesus. Therefore, he teaches that salvation is truly conditional, but he often hesitates to admit it, for fear of being misunderstood. He will maintain that God's love for every sinner is genuine and unconditional, but he also maintains that salvation has a truly independent human requirement. He says that he believes in salvation by grace. He believes that his understanding is what the Bible teaches.

He will often site texts such as **John 3**, where Jesus said God loved the world, and that He came to save the world. He also will site **1 Tim 2:4**, where Paul says that God desires all men to be saved, and **1 John 2:2**, where John states that Jesus is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world. This pastor will use many other texts of Scripture to defend his position; some of them are the same texts, which the first pastor uses to defend his position. Both pastors are reading the same Bible. (Sometimes they are even reading the same translation.) Who's right?

2.3 BOTH PASTORS SHARE A COMMON PROBLEM

Both pastors share a common problem and we will be referring to this problem throughout our study. **The problem is this: How can salvation be all of grace if it has a condition (or requirement) that must be met by the sinner?** To put it another way, how can salvation have a condition but not be "earned by our works" or "deserved" by the sinner? This might appear to be a contradiction in the Bible . . . but it isn't.

The first pastor (the Calvinist) says that everyone sins and must be saved from the wrath of God to enjoy eternal life. He maintains that there is ultimately only one truly free and crucial decision regarding any sinner's salvation. That decision is entirely God's and He made it before the foundation of the world. This pastor believes that God alone decides (and determines) who will be saved because God decides who will have faith and who Jesus died for. As we will see, the first pastor will say things like:

The Shepherd has to do *everything* for the sheep.

Or he might say:

A sheep can contribute nothing to its salvation.¹

His system makes certain that God alone gets all the glory when sinners are saved because the faith to believe the gospel would be an irresistible gift, from God, to the elect. Nevertheless, this pastor will still maintain that the gift of salvation must be voluntarily received by the “free will” of the chosen sinner. **As you can imagine, the Calvinistic pastor’s explanation of how faith can be both unavoidable and voluntary gets pretty technical. (It ain’t no job for boys.)** We will be addressing this critical distinction as we go along, especially in Chapter 10.

The second pastor wholeheartedly agrees that everyone sins and must be saved from the wrath of God. He agrees that salvation is a gift, and he maintains that the gift of salvation must be voluntarily received, through faith, by exercising our “free will”. **Here again, is the rub: The two pastors do not agree on the definition and context of the terms “voluntary” and “free will”.** The non-Calvinistic pastor teaches that salvation has an independent human condition, and the gift of salvation may be received (or rejected) by every adult sinner of sound mind. He insists that God genuinely desires to save every single sinner *if* we meet the necessary condition. He believes that the condition may be met *without* requiring God’s supernatural and irresistible assistance. He maintains that there are two crucial decisions regarding any adult sinner’s salvation. One decision is made by God and the other decision is made by the sinner. God must decide to save penitent sinners in the first place *and* we must decide to repent. Nevertheless, this pastor believes that God should still get all the glory for salvation, because the need for salvation is not something to brag about.

2.4 ILLUSTRATIONS, PARABLES, AND METAPHORS

It has been said that all of life illustrates biblical truth. As you know, Scripture uses many parables and metaphors to illustrate doctrine. Our first pastor (the Calvinist) views the overall essence of salvation as a quite literal resurrection from the dead, which obviously could not

have an independent and coherent human condition. A dead person is not capable of meeting any conditions that would require life. In his view, salvation is utterly irresistible . . . if you were chosen for it. Likewise, for those not chosen, damnation is also irresistible. **In the Calvinistic system, there is nothing that any sinner can do to prevent, or alter, their predetermined eternal destiny. Absolutely nothing.**

Our second pastor (the non-Calvinist) views the overall essence of salvation as a remedy for a terminally ill sinner that may be received and enjoyed, or it may be refused with eternally fatal consequences. In the non-Calvinistic view, salvation and damnation are both resistible. You don't have to go to heaven and you don't have to go to hell. (However, you will go to one or the other.)

We must note here at the outset that both types of illustrations are used in the Bible to describe salvation. Sometimes the Bible speaks of salvation as a healing. Sometimes the Bible speaks of salvation as the reconciliation of enemies, or the recovery of that which was lost. Sometimes the Bible speaks of salvation as freedom from bondage or slavery. Sometimes it speaks of salvation as an awakening from sleep or a resurrection from the dead. Sometimes the Bible speaks of salvation as running a race or winning a fight. Sometimes salvation is described as rest for the weary.

Some of Jesus' parables, like the parable of the lost sheep, emphasize God's role in salvation. In that parable, the Shepherd simply comes and rescues the lost sheep. The sheep plays no decisive role in its rescue. The sheep did not *decide* to go with the shepherd. It was simply overpowered and carried to safety by the shepherd.

Other parables, like the hidden treasure, emphasize man's role in salvation. In that parable, the man finds the treasure and realizes that it is worth more than everything he already owns. Therefore, he sells everything to purchase the land with the treasure on it. Also, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father does not track down the son, subdue him, and drag him back home. The father waits for the son to "come to his senses" or repent.

These parables do not contradict one another. They complement one another. They each teach an aspect or perspective of the Kingdom of God and the biblical doctrines of salvation. (We assume here that

our nuanced Calvinistic friends will allow that sinners do play some kind of role in their own salvation.)

The “I am” statements of Jesus also provide insight into the nature of the biblical salvation. When Jesus says that He is the Way, it is clear that we are to walk in Him. When He says that He is the Door (or Gate) it is clear that we must enter into life through Him. He is the Good Shepherd and we must hear His voice and follow Him. He is the Bread of life and we must “eat” of His “body”. He is the Truth and we must believe Him in order to be saved. Some biblical metaphors view salvation from God’s perspective and some view salvation from man’s perspective. Some do both. In this book, we will attempt to sort them out . . . or rightly divide them.

Thus the question: Is the pre-eminent essence of our salvation from sin a resurrection, which cannot be resisted, or a remedy that must be voluntarily received?

That question is somewhere near the heart of our debate. It can’t be both in the exact same context. A dead man is not merely sick and a sick man is not dead. If you are asleep then you are not dead. Likewise, someone lost in the desert is not dead . . . yet. A slave is not dead. Most enemies are alive. (A dead enemy is not usually a big problem, it’s a problem solved.) As we will see, our solution will depend on what should be understood in a strict literal sense, and what should be understood as figurative. And what may be a little of both.

2.5 BOTH PASTORS CAN’T BE RIGHT

As stated, both of our visiting pastors can’t be right. One says that the essence of the baby’s salvation would be literally irresistible and the other says it can be resisted. They both have some explaining to do. The first view seems simple enough but hard to accept. The other view seems a little mixed up but easier to accept. Here is another way of framing our debate: Is the new baby’s eternal destiny yet to be determined, or has it already been irreversibly predetermined by God? This question is also at the heart of the debate. Therefore, I trust you can see how the debate is somewhat philosophical.

For those into philosophy, both sides agree that the outcome is “determined.” By this, we understand that there will be actual reasons, which determine the outcome. Both sides agree that our eternal destiny

is not determined by some arbitrary stroke of luck or random chance. Both agree that God did not blindfold Himself and grab some names out of a hat in order to determine who would be forgiven. Both sides of our debate agree that God predestined *the plan* of salvation before the foundation of the world. The plan itself is an immutable eternal decree. It can't be changed. The debate is asking whether God's curse on Adam's sin determined the outcome for those who perish, and if God, alone, determines the outcome for the saved. **We are asking if God has assigned to every adult sinner any necessary, independent, and co-operative role in the outcome.** He could certainly do that and still be sovereign. God does not need to relinquish His sovereign reign in order to delegate some authority to His fallen creatures.

2.6 POINTS OF AGREEMENT

We should note, also, both pastors agree that salvation is conditional upon *the will and works of God*. God sets the terms and conditions for eternal life and there are conditions within the plan of salvation, which only God can meet. First, there would be no plan of salvation for anyone if God did not decree that there should be one. Both pastors also agree that we must have our sins properly atoned, in order to be forgiven. That is a condition, which we could not possibly bring to pass on our own. **We are never commanded in Scripture to atone for our sin or make ourselves born again.** Obviously, if God makes no plan of salvation then no guilty sinner would ever be saved.

Both of our pastors agree that sinners, of sound mind, must come to humble faith in the truth to be saved from the wrath of God, which is due *their own sin*. Since the coming of Jesus, we know that the truth is much more fully and clearly revealed in the gospel of Christ. Jesus is the Truth . . . and always has been. Every culpable sinner will need the mercy of God for salvation, and that is an important point of agreement. They agree that we all need the cross of Christ in order to be forgiven. These are some big reasons why this debate should generally be viewed as a debate among the family of genuine believers. (Note: Although this is an important point of agreement, we will eventually see that the two pastors do not entirely agree on the meaning of the phrase "their own sin.")

2.7 ADAM'S HOUSE IS ON FIRE

Here again, is a basic and crucial question in our study: How can salvation be all of grace and yet require a condition, which must be met by the sinner alone? The presence of any independent human condition would suggest that salvation might be somehow *merited*. The problem, as you may know, is that the word “grace” means “*unmerited favor*.” How you answer this question will help determine whether you are a Calvinist or not. I have always felt some sympathy for kids who are told that they can’t do anything to be saved, but they are also told that they must repent of their sin and believe in Jesus, if they want to be saved. This could confuse an adult.

Calvinists, and those influenced by them, are often confused by this question. Some Calvinistic teachers will scoff at the very notion that we each must meet a human condition in order to be forgiven. This would be, in their minds, salvation by works. It would be the same as paying money or sacrificing animals to be saved. Their system is really simple and easy to illustrate. It goes like this: Adam’s house is on fire and all of his descendants are *to blame* for starting the fire. They are all overcome by the fire; in fact, they have already died in the fire. God simply chooses some of Adam’s family to be rescued and brought back to life. Jesus drags them from the inferno and leaves the rest to burn. End of story. In this brand of Calvinism, it is not about having an *opportunity* to be saved. It is only about God’s choice of who to save. This understanding is sometimes called “Hyper Calvinism.” The chosen sinners played no essential role in their own salvation.

Now, most Calvinistic pastors and teachers are a little more nuanced than that. (Note: The term “nuanced” can sometimes be code word for inconsistent or illogical.) Most Calvinists will also scoff at the notion of a conditional salvation in one sermon, but then in another sermon, they teach that salvation has a necessary human condition. Thus, they implore sinners to repent and trust Christ, but they really don’t like the idea of an independent condition, which must be met by the chosen sinner. Nevertheless, the nuanced Calvinist tends to agree that the “chosen” sinners must repent and believe the truth or they will not be saved.

This would be their story: Every person is trapped by the fire in Adam’s house, which they helped to start. These Calvinists also

assume that everyone has already died in the fire. Jesus rushes in and commands everyone to cry out to Him if they want to be rescued. He promises that if they do then He will take them to safety. However, no one answers . . . because dead people can't hear and answer the call. So God resuscitates the chosen souls in such a way that they can now cry out for help. *They are no longer capable of silence.* Thus, they cry out for help, and Jesus drags them to safety.

In this scenario, it *appears* that the rescued sinners were "voluntarily" asking to be rescued . . . but not really. That is all they could do once they were resuscitated. God benevolently and irresistibly enabled them to cry out for help and then He "answered" their irresistible prayer. They did not meet the condition . . . independently. They were "graciously enabled" to meet the condition. They could not do otherwise. If you buy into this story, as biblical, then you will make a good Calvinist. I hope you can see that there isn't much meaningful difference between this scenario and the first one. (Author's confession: When I was a Calvinist, I had more trouble fending off hyper-Calvinism than non-Calvinism. I didn't want to be a hyper-Calvinist but I came to see that there wasn't any real difference.)

Our Calvinistic pastor teaches that those who are not chosen will not receive the ability to have faith; therefore, they cannot meet the "condition" which is attached to salvation and they will be consumed by the fire in Adam's house. They weren't chosen for rescue. They won't enjoy God forever. God never really wanted them to enjoy Him forever. They were created as "vessels of wrath" to be eternally destroyed. They never had a genuine opportunity to be saved. If God had wanted them to trust Him then He would have given them the ability to trust Him.

If you want to be a Calvinist then you should be prepared to acknowledge that God does not really desire every person to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. It is the inescapable conclusion of their system. In their opinion, God has not made a good faith provision for the salvation of all sinners. They would say that God has only made a provision for the salvation of all elect sinners.

Our non-Calvinist, on the other hand, insists that God's offer of mercy is genuine for every sinner, since it is backed up by the death of Christ for everyone in the whole world. He teaches that God has given

everyone the capacity to repent. He believes that God gives both the ability to believe the truth and the ability to reject the truth to every one of sound mind. In his system, everyone is trapped by the guilt of their own actual sin in Adam's burning house. They didn't start the fire but they have thrown gasoline on it and cannot escape on their own. They cannot put the fire out but they can actually cry out for help. If they do, then Jesus will drag them to safety. This pastor teaches that God has sovereignly decreed that the individual sinner will play a vital and co-operative role in his/her eternal destiny. We will explore all this in more detail, as we develop the agreements and disagreements between the two pastors. The debate will be expanded to other related issues. The plot will thicken like Grandma's gravy.

Some may be saying, "How can there be much debate over this? The first pastor is a fatalist who's never read John 3:16." Or perhaps, my Calvinistic friends are already (and typically) protesting: "Another straw man! You misrepresent the Reformed view to tear it up!" Not so to both. The first pastor is teaching a *kind* of Christian fatalism, but you can bet the house he's read John 3:16 . . . and probably every other word in the Bible. He may even have read them in the original languages and/or Latin. Because there are so many subtle twists and turns, in the defense of the Calvinistic system, it is very easy to misrepresent their view, and this is where the debate often bogs down.

The bottom line of our debate is really quite simple. The bottom line conclusion of the Calvinistic position simply says that, by the time you were born, your eternal destiny was already decided by God. You will be totally and utterly helpless to alter it. It can't be altered by any family member, minister, friend, or foe. It is an *eternal decree* of God. If God chose you for salvation then you can't resist choosing life. If He did not choose you for salvation then you cannot resist choosing death. **In the Reformed system, it is not about having an "opportunity" to be saved. Either you will be saved by God or you will not. An opportunity suggests there would be a meaningful condition for salvation. Their system is more than simple. It is simplistic.**

If any Calvinist sympathizer thinks this is an unfair summary then we need only to ask one question: "What essential aspect of salvation is resistible for the elect?" If your answer is, "no essential aspect of salvation is resistible," then you should own the title of "Christian Fatalist." The chosen sinners would not play any truly independent

role, which would be vital to being forgiven. Their salvation is entirely determined by forces outside of themselves . . . namely God.

2.8 WESTMINSTER—ETERNAL DECREES

Again, if you profess to be a Calvinist then you may not like this bare bones presentation, but it is accurate. If you doubt the accuracy of my descriptions, I could direct you to many different proofs. But in the interest of time I will only direct you to The Westminster Confession of Faith, particularly Chapter 3 on the Eternal Decrees.

#3 By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.

#4 These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

#5 Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.²

Whew! # 5 is a mouthful. You may need to read it again. (My English teachers would have blasted me for writing such long sentences, if I had been capable of it.) The Bible has some long sentences too. It gets tricky when you need to say many things all at once. Fortunately, we have commentators on the confessions as well as the Bible. Here is what G. I. Williamson, a Calvinistic Presbyterian, says on page 33 of his popular study guide on the Confession:

That God is the one who determines who shall, and who shall not be saved, is one of the clearest teachings in Scripture.

But what is of cardinal importance is to recognize that God's sovereign determination of the destinies of the souls of men is **not conditional.**³

That second statement is clear. He is saying that the salvation of the elect and the damnation of the non-elect are both unconditional. That is, sinners do not *independently* meet any conditions, which will determine their eternal destinies. He is saying that God ultimately predetermines the destiny of every soul. You can also find the same basic teachings in the Old London Confession and The Philadelphia Confession of faith. They are the Baptistic offspring of the Westminster Confession. The Reformed view of salvation is not limited to Presbyterians. Many Baptists hold to an irresistible salvation as well. You can also find the same basic teaching in the Canons of Dort/Dordt (1618-1619), the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Second Helvetic Confession (1566). (It seems that many folks, in the 16th and 17th centuries were fond of theology. Of course, they didn't have video games, television, and the internet back then.)

In a nutshell, the fundamental differences between the two positions are quite simple. One pastor says that salvation requires God's *irresistible* grace, which is only given to the chosen sinners. He maintains that salvation is impossible for those not chosen. The other pastor says that God has made salvation available for every sinner . . . if they meet the designated condition, by the *common* grace of God. When the bare bones differences are contrasted in this way, it may not seem like much of a debate. This is why you very rarely hear an experienced defender of the Calvinistic position use such straightforward language and illustration of their system. Most Calvinists don't like their doctrines of salvation to be put in nutshells. They prefer *libraries*.

Succinct summations, which include practical clarity on the Reformed doctrines of salvation, don't go over very well with the rank and file Bible believer of any era or culture. Calvinists typically overwhelm their opponents with lengthy and technical arguments. They don't merely write books on this debate. They write large books on single aspects of the debate. This approach is both their strength and their weakness in terms of winning the majority of minds within the Church.

Calvinists prefer to use summary terms that are more ambiguous, such as "salvation is all of grace" or "sovereign grace." Some use the

term “effectual grace”. These terms are often used as code words for their clear, yet controversial, term, which is *irresistible grace*. **The Calvinist relies upon these kinds of double meanings like Samson relied on his hair.** Very few Calvinists will ever simply state that many babies are born into this world with absolutely no eternal hope. (This is especially true when they are born into their *own* families, or within their *own* churches.) This debate would be much easier if Calvinists would state their conclusions succinctly, but Calvinistic election is a tough doctrine to teach *clearly*. On the other hand, it should be conceded that non-Calvinists often fail to be as clear and thorough as they need to be, in stating their positions. Their position can quickly deteriorate into a salvation by personal holiness or, at least, “doing better.”

There are some very practical implications of the Reformed view. A truly Calvinistic missionary or evangelist cannot look any sinner in the eye and tell them that God loves them, or that Jesus died for them. Some never do. Their problem is obvious. Using full disclosure, they must go into the uttermost parts of the world and tell all men everywhere that Jesus *might have* died for them . . . or He *might not* have died for them. They could only know if Jesus died for them *after* they believe that He died for them. This kind of approach is obviously confusing. I hope to show that it is also not biblical. **Not many Calvinists will tell their own kids that Jesus might not have died for them, but it is the logical and necessary implication of their system.** I would be willing to bet a steak dinner that some Calvinistic parents have told their kids that they may not be elect, and Jesus may not have died for them. I hope their kids are OK. Others may not explicitly say it, but they would have implied it, and kids pick up on these things more than we might think.

The hypocrisy of many professing Calvinists is exposed at this point, even those who ascribe to the “Covenant” brand of Calvinism. If the patriarch Isaac’s firstborn son was not chosen for salvation then believers should not assume that God has chosen their kids to be saved. As we will see at some length, true Calvinists believe that God did not choose to make salvation possible for Isaac’s firstborn son. His name was Esau. He was the grandson of Abraham, but as a little boy, Esau would not have been a true child of the covenant.

Most Calvinists would rarely want to plainly state that God has not made a plan of salvation for every sinner. They get a little fuzzy

on this point. They are aware that this is not the way the Bible reads to the average person. The Bible surely sounds like God has made a good faith offer of salvation for every sinner . . . if they meet the condition of repentance and faith. Again, the best defense of Calvinism is lengthy, technical, and arduous. They do love their books (and that is not necessarily a bad thing). For the proponents of the Reformed view, the harder all this is to understand . . . the better. Those who reduce the defense of Calvinism to the bare essentials get quickly dismissed as wacky, or labeled as hyper-Calvinists, and only a few consider that a compliment.

2.9 PRESENTATION CAN OBSCURE SUBSTANCE

As mentioned, one of the objectives of this writing will be to show that historical Calvinism is not very distinct from so-called “hyper—Calvinism.” As noted in the illustrations of the fire in Adam’s house, Calvinism and hyper-Calvinism seem to be the same thing but with different *presentations*. They differ only in appearance and emphasis. It’s like a fast food baked potato versus one at a fancy restaurant. One comes through a drive thru window in a cheap paper bag with a plastic fork, and the other comes in a fancy dining room with a polished silver fork, and all swirled up to look pretty. Either way, it’s still a just a potato. The most effective Calvinists have always been those who can slightly obscure the simple, but startling, conclusions of their system. They make Calvinism sound like non-Calvinism as much as possible. Calvinistic teachers tend to be very good with words.

We will site a few examples as we go along. One example of this type of presentation is made by R.C. Sproul in his “Kingdom Feast” teaching series. Dr. Sproul, a tireless defender of the Calvinistic system, refers to the cross as

. . . the universal sign of hope for the human race.⁴

Both sides of our debate would agree with this statement but they would not understand the term “universal” in the same way. As we will see, historical Calvinism does not teach that Jesus died on the cross for every sinner in the human race. They teach that He only died for every *elect* sinner from all tribes and nations of the human race. Calling the

cross a “universal” sign of hope makes it sound like Jesus may have died to redeem every single person, without plainly denying it.

(Please don’t read too much into the criticism, I think R.C. Sproul is an excellent Bible teacher. He has been a staunch defender of the existence and holiness of God. He has defended the Bible, the gospel of Christ, and many issues regarding the Church. He’s been a pillar, and Ligonier Ministries has been a great blessing. That’s why all this “irresistible” salvation bugs me. If it weren’t for people like R.C. Sproul teaching Calvinism then I would have little problem blowing it off as “preacher speak.” I know he is in good company and I understand how they come to their conclusions. I just don’t think they are right.)

In my time as a Calvinist, I found that if you want to win the debate (and they often do) then you have to take the long roads that wind and turn through a handful of biblical inferences and tricky philosophical distinctions. You must do your best to avoid stating your astonishing conclusions too quickly. Or, if you want to win quickly, make the other side look like they are teaching a salvation that is conditional upon our own righteousness. Most Bible students know better than that. This is one reason that Calvinism often goes unchallenged. The non-Calvinist is often branded as a proud moralist (whatever that means) or a defender of Roman Catholicism. That price is too high for many Evangelicals to warrant engaging the debate. When all else fails, Calvinists typically accuse those on the Arminian side of being unwilling to accept the depth of their total depravity. It sounds quite pious. The more Greek, Latin, and Jonathan Edwards you can use to simultaneously support, yet obscure, the startling conclusions . . . the better. The defense of Calvinism is kind of an art.

3.0 Some Necessary Words about Words

Now I freely admit that a layman with a Bible dictionary can be a dangerous thing, but I will do my best with what I have to work with. Also, I feel your temptation to skip this chapter . . . but don't. We will be referring to it later on. Even if you are a veteran of the debate, you should read this section before moving on. It isn't that long, and a review of the words and terms of the debate will help in further defining it.

Often, when the two positions are explained they tend to read awkwardly unless you are familiar with the debate and its terms. The average Christian is not always familiar with the terms or concepts. Therefore, the explanations can come across as a bunch of confusing mumbo jumbo. Also, there is often a lot of liberty taken with terms that are relative and must be defined in specific contexts.

3.1 TWO TERMS NOT IN THE BIBLE: IMPLICIT & EXPLICIT

Two terms that I want to examine first may be familiar. They are the words “implicit” and “explicit.” You won’t find these words in the Bible but they are very important terms in studying the Bible. The word “explicit” means something that is stated clearly, with no ambiguity. It is plain and definite. When Jesus said the following to the disciples, He was speaking explicitly:

Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And on the third day he will rise again. Matthew 20:18-19

There should be no doubt regarding the Lord’s meaning. Jesus was not speaking in a parable or metaphor. He was not merely implying something. He was not trying to hide His meaning. He was making a clear statement of fact that did indeed come to pass exactly as He predicted.

When we say something is “implicit”, we mean that it is implied or suggested. It may be fairly obvious or it may be quite subtle. It is not perfectly clear or expressly stated. The word of God is full of implied

meaning. As an example, when Jesus was teaching on prayer, He said the following:

Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him? Matthew 7:9-11

There is a lot *implied* in these words of Jesus. In these statements, Jesus has given an implied lesson on proper parenting. Parents should provide for their children. He is teaching that bread and fish are acceptable foods for children. Stones and snakes are not part of a healthy diet for kids. Jesus is also teaching us about the nature of mankind. He is quite clearly implying that mankind is basically evil with a capacity to do good things. Jesus is also implying some things about the character of God. God is holy and benevolent. He said all this while telling us, explicitly, that we should pray and expect God to answer our prayers for good things. Jesus was able to say a lot with a few words and such is the glorious wonder of the Word of God.

This whole debate over election has to do with that which we understand to be explicit in the Bible, and that which we understand to be implied in the Bible. Anyone can make the mistake of allowing, that which may be implied in Scripture to over rule that which is very clear in Scripture. To be fair, both sides of the debate will be found drawing some conclusions based on their inferences of what Scripture explicitly states. If this whole debate boils down to a debate over biblical inferences, then I think the non-Calvinist's inferences are better than the Calvinist's inferences.

3.2 THE WILL OF GOD

Our difficulty with words is never more evident than in the use of the phrase "the will of God." Therefore, we will try to get our definitions clear at the outset. We will not try to win the debate before it gets started by conveniently slanting the definitions to our liking. We will leave that game to the politicians and marketing departments of the world. It has no business in the pursuit of God's Truth. **Perception**

may be considered reality in politics and marketing but never ever in the Kingdom of God, and the pursuit of “true” truth. This is not to say that there are no honest differences of opinion over definitions.

The *will of God*. This could be a book by itself, but I will try to keep it short and to the purpose of this writing. Again, context is crucial to understanding the various aspects of the will of God. Some of the adjectives that are used by Bible teachers to describe the will of God, when used as a noun, include sovereign, immutable, ordained, established, perfect, desired, hidden/secret, revealed, and permissive. These are all words, which have been used to describe some aspect of God’s will. All of these are implied in Scripture. Some are used in the very texts of Scripture. Deliberate deception and/or sloppiness here have caused no small amount of confusion and aggravation.

I suppose that one of the simplest ways to begin breaking down the will of God, in our present study, is to go back to the beginning with this basic question: “Was it God’s will for Adam to fall and infect the entire human race with sin?”

One person will answer that it certainly *was not* God’s will. God told them not to eat from the tree. The command was crystal clear: “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” Gen. 2.17 It could not have been God’s will for man to fall into sin. If God had willed for them, to sin then He would be a sinner Himself, and God is holy. He doesn’t sin or tempt anyone to sin. James 1 How could God, who is indescribably holy, *want* someone to sin? Anytime? Anywhere?

And of course somebody else will say that it most certainly *was* God’s will for Adam to fall because *it happened*. God is sovereign and “doth freely and immutably ordain all things that come to pass.” So says the Westminster writers and common sense. Nothing can happen unless God wants it to, and that is why we call Him “God.” Also, the Bible says that God “. . . works all things according to the counsel of His will . . .” Eph. 1.11 Therefore if anything exists, or any event comes to pass, then it must be the will of God . . . in one sense. It does not necessarily mean that God approves of that which He ordains to occur.

This common Sunday school exercise should be enough to get the idea. I expect that anyone who has any interest in this book will

know that there is no contradiction here, but the words we use can be tricky. The will of God must be understood in different contexts. God is in control of everything and He directly manipulates as much as He sovereignly chooses. Nevertheless, we know that He does not always choose to use His power to manipulate every event, action, and thought. Perhaps we can all agree that whatever God *decrees* . . . will inevitably occur, but that which He *desires*, may, or may not, occur.

If Adam's fall *pleased* the Lord, in the sense that we most often use the term, then He is not God and we are all still groping for the real one. The LORD God doesn't like sin. No sin has ever pleased Him. It provokes Him and He can do something about it. Mankind was made "very good" and we were intended to reflect the holy image of God. If the fall was not preventable then God is not as powerful as we think. The stark reality is that God could have stopped the fall any number of ways but He didn't *want* to. It was not his will to prevent the fall, even though He could.

We should agree that the fall did not please God, but He was pleased to permit it to occur. Such is our dilemma with language. Sometimes words have two meanings. God "ordains" everything that happens, but not everything pleases Him. There is a distinction between God's desired will, which always pleases Him, and His permissive will, which may, or may not, please Him. Any sin is such a place. Everything that happens must happen within the overall scope of God's will, yet God allows things to occur that He does not desire to occur.

One scripture text, which proves that the word "pleased" must have more than one meaning, is when Isaiah prophesied of Christ's sufferings. Isaiah said, "It pleased the Lord to bruise him." Isaiah 53.10. Likewise, in the New Testament, Matthew quotes the Old Testament when it says, "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. Mt 26:31" It's hard to believe that the Father was all that *pleased*, (in the more common use of the term), when He dropped the knife, as it were, on His only begotten Son. It is doubtful that this brought Him the same kind of delight and pleasure that He gets in showing mercy, or when the truth is in our hearts. Yet it's the same word in the Hebrew.

It must have been difficult for the Father to "strike" the Son. If ever the Godhead could be somehow conflicted, then this would have been the pre-eminent occasion.

Most of us can easily relate to this distinction. It may not be our desired will to study or work long hours, but it is our will to get the diploma and/or the paycheck. A conscientious father will tell you that he does not get any pleasure from disciplining his kids, but he only *wants* to do it, because it is for their own good. His desire for them to use their freedom wisely is greater than his desire to let them completely alone and go astray.

3.3 CAN THE WILL OF GOD BE RESISTED?

“The will of God can never be resisted by men unless it is God’s will to permit them to resist it.” That statement should smell a little fishy to you. It illustrates how we can easily garble the use of words. We need to be more precise. It would be better to say, “The *ordained* will of God cannot be resisted, but the *desired* will of God can be resisted.” Men do that every day. Some call this “desired” will of God the “preceptive” will of God. God makes precepts and sinners violate them.

God does not run the universe the way sinful men would if they had His power. In some ways, “God’s will” can be resisted and in some ways, it cannot be resisted. Those who try to live without water, food, and oxygen don’t last long. These are examples of the “will of God” which are essentially irresistible. We have no choice but to abide by them if we wish to stay alive. The same result occurs with those who try to arrange salvation on their own terms. Death.

The commands to honor our parents, have no other gods, be not drunk with wine, be subject to the governing authorities, etc, are all examples of the will of God that can be resisted. Men are not irresistibly enabled to keep these laws. These commandments are the will of God and they can be broken. (We should hold these truths to be self-evident. These ordinances get broken with regularity; some by professing Christians, even the very elect.)

In this writing, we are going to try and determine whether the command to repent and believe the truth is really the “desired” will of God for every sinner ever born. If any sinner ends up in hell then we can be sure that it is not the “ordained” will of God for every sinner to repent and believe the truth. We will try to determine whether saving faith is resistible, or irresistible, for

every sinner ever born. It can't be both in the same sense. They are opposites.

3.4 CONCURRENCE

Another aspect of the will of God, which is essential to our debate, is found in the term “concurrence.” One way in which concurrence happens is when our sinful will and God’s righteous will coincide. Like most doctrine, it is better understood by illustration. Two well-known historical accounts, in the Bible, are the suffering of Job and the mistreatment of Joseph by his brothers. It has been said that the true test of any action lies in its motive. That is wonderfully illustrated in these two biblical accounts.

You remember that God agreed, at Satan’s prompting, to test Job. Job’s misery began when the Sabeans and Chaldeans attacked his servants and killed them. They also stole his oxen, donkeys, and camels. Then, a tremendous windstorm came, which collapsed Job’s house and killed his children. Afterwards, God said to Satan,

Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil? And still he holds fast to his integrity, although you incited Me against him, to destroy him without a cause. Job 2:3

I sure hope we all would agree that Satan did not outwit or overpower God in this episode. God acknowledges that he is *indirectly* responsible for Job’s misery. This does not mean that God Himself did any sin. God is indirectly responsible for every thing that takes place. He is the “first cause” but that does not mean He directly causes sin. Satan and his ungodly accomplices were free to do what they wanted . . . which was to plunder Job. Satan wanted Job to give up his faith. The Sabeans and Chaldeans wanted his stuff. Job’s questions and complaints throughout the ordeal indicate that his mind was not being irresistibly propped up by God. God boasts of *Job’s* integrity. He did not boast of His own ability to irresistibly cause Job’s longsuffering. Job maintained his integrity by clinging to, and defending, God’s integrity.

God and Satan both “wanted” the same events to occur. But they did not want them to occur for the same reason or motive. This

is concurrence. God's motives for permitting (or ordaining) Job's suffering were righteous, but the motives of Satan and Job's enemies were not. Satan and his accomplices will be held culpable for evil, but God will not. Most believers, on both sides of our debate, would likely agree that Job's enemies were not irresistibly forced by God, Satan, or their sinful nature to plunder Job's possessions. They were capable of leaving him alone.

The second common illustration of concurrence is found in the life of Joseph. You will remember how Joseph's envious brothers sold Him as a slave and then told their father that he had been killed by an animal. Many years later, through no little drama, Joseph was put in charge of operations in the entire land of Egypt. You will remember the famine that forced Joseph's brothers into Egypt where, lo and behold, they end up at the mercy of their "little" brother. Joseph now holds their lives in his hands. (If you know anything of sibling rivalry, then you know that this is what we often call "payback time.") But as you know, Joseph took the high road, forgave his brothers, got to see his father, and it all worked together for good. Joseph made this remarkable statement to his guilty and frightened brothers:

Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. Gen.50:19-20

We see the brilliant working of God's providence in affecting the outcome of events without forcibly manipulating anybody's sinful decisions. Man's free agency does not over-ride God's eternal decrees. We also get a beautiful example of how a man, who is himself a sinner, can truly reflect the image of God by forgiving the betrayal of others . . . even his family.

There are other examples in Scripture where the evil actions and intentions of men (or Satan) are used by God to bring about His good and perfect will. So who's to bless and who's to blame?" Was it God's will for these bad things to happen? Yes, in the over-arching divine context, and no, in the moral or ethical context.

Likewise, it is entirely possible (and reasonable) that the people who played a role in the crucifixion of Jesus will be held accountable for that sin . . . even though God wanted the crucifixion to take place.

The good news and wonderful irony, of course, is that even those people who demanded, ordered, and carried out the execution of Jesus Christ could be saved by that same execution. It was the Just for the unjust.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God . . . Rom 11:33

3.5 FREE WILL AND A FEW MORE TERMS

We may need to go over a few more words. Historically, some of the most critical points in this whole debate are differences over a handful of definitions. Some may not be familiar to every reader.

The first is soteriology. It simply means the study of salvation, or having to do with the doctrines of salvation. According to my big Random House dictionary, it comes from a Greek word that means salvation or deliverance. It is a branch of theology, which is, of course, the study of God. The subject of this book is primarily soteriological. It is about how a sinner, who is at enmity with God, can be permanently reconciled to Him, and enjoy Him forever.

Salvific—having to do with salvation, like it sounds. It's the same as soteriological . . . only easier.

Freedom—My dictionary lists 17 definitions of the word freedom. It makes me wish that whoever is in charge of the English language would get their stuff together. To be fair, I suppose if we had one word for every possible meaning then we might have too many words, and the next generation would mess everything up anyway. They always do. The kids, today, often say something is *bad* when they mean it is really good. In sports talk today, you will hear young commentators say that an athlete is “sick.” They do not mean that he has the flu. They mean he is incredibly talented at his sport. (I think they mean that the athlete is so outstanding that he makes them sick from envy.) Likewise, nobody says “withersoever the governor listeth,” any more. (See James 3:4 in the King James Version.) Language changes and we have to deal with it.

The old Kris Kristofferson song entitled Me and Bobby McGee was made famous by Janis Joplin. One line says,

“Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose.”¹

I think there is some truth in that but it is not the only definition of the word “freedom”. We might speak of the freedom to vote even if we don’t want to vote. We may speak of freedom in the context of doing something (like skydiving) that we have longed to do, but could not, because of the restrictions of age, money, health, or fear. We might speak of the freedom to choose between various options or opportunities, such as what kind of house to buy; or whether to live in the city, suburbs, or country.

The first definition for freedom in my dictionary says it is “a state of being at liberty rather than in confinement or under physical restraint.” The second definition says that it is “to be exempt from external control, interference, regulation, etc.” You can see how there could be various degrees of freedom in various contexts. Freedom is often a function of the amount of external compulsion (or restriction) in a given context. It is possible to have no freedom, a little freedom, or a lot of freedom in many situations. God would be the only being with total freedom from external control. Creatures cannot impose their will on their Creator. God doesn’t answer to anyone but Himself. This is the reason that men have tried so hard to usurp God’s place. They crave the kind of absolute freedom that only God enjoys. We can all be grateful that no sinner has ever had divine autonomy.

In our discussion of biblical election, we will be talking about the freedom from our natural inclinations to sin and unbelief. Thanks to Adam’s fall, there is a sense in which we need to be set free . . . from ourselves. We will also be talking about the freedom to choose between contrary options, and contrary moral options. This is where the discussion of election can become more complex. The most sophisticated Calvinists have a *very particular* definition for freedom in the context of choosing to believe (or reject) the gospel. You will want to keep this question in mind as we progress in the debate.

Liberty—If you thought that liberty meant the same thing as freedom then you are probably not a serious Calvinist, or you haven’t been one

for long. This is one of the most important, yet, subtle distinctions used to defend the Calvinistic system. Calvinists rely heavily upon their philosophical distinction between “freedom” and “liberty”. Most dictionaries will also give this word several definitions. (Mine has eight, if you count the one about a female figure personifying freedom, such as “Lady Liberty”.) Most dictionaries will use the word “freedom” to describe “liberty” in the same way they use the term “liberty” to describe “freedom.” They are basically synonyms. Like the word “freedom,” the word “liberty” carries with it the idea of the absence of external control, regulation, restriction, impediment, obligation, hindrance, and/or the fear of negative consequences. We are told that Augustine was the first to make a distinction between freedom and liberty in the discussion of election. I’m sure he had a different dictionary.

There is a whole range of applications for the terms “freedom” and “liberty.” This is one reason why the debate drags on. Most Christians would assume that when they made the decision to follow Jesus . . . they would also have had the “liberty” to reject following Jesus. Not the Calvinist. He calls that impossible. It seems that most Calvinists do not see the liberty to follow Jesus (or reject Him) in the same way as they see the liberty to choose between stealing a car . . . and not stealing a car. They say the choice is “determined” but I think it is better described as determinism. Some Calvinists teach a kind of determinism that would be on steroids. **Calvinists, who know their stuff, would say that no sinner has ever possessed both the liberty of will to accept the gospel and the liberty of will to reject the gospel at any point of time.** (It is obvious that no one could actually choose to both reject Jesus and follow him at the same time. That would be like saying we could choose to walk North and South at the same time.) Calvinists reject the notion that anyone can possess the *power of contrary choice* in the context of saving faith. Don’t worry if you are having trouble getting your mind around this distinction. It should become clearer as we go along. I hope.

Free will—is therefore a slippery term that is not used in the Bible in the sense that it is most often used in this debate. (Perhaps, this should tip us off as to its importance to God in conveying His will in Scripture.) As noted before, the word “will” is a multi-purpose word. Let’s go ahead and take a brief look into this term since it is at the heart of the debate.

The term “free will” opens up some questions because freedom can be enjoyed, limited, and lost in many contexts. The typical meaning of the word “will”, as it is used in our study, is *the ability of the mind (or heart) to choose*. Our choices can be rather inconsequential preferences, such as how we like our eggs. We can have our eggs scrambled, fried, or hard-boiled and there are no moral implications in the decision. Our choices can also be moral choices. We can choose to lie, steal, or commit adultery. If God, for some reason, issued a commandment, which declared that we must only eat scrambled eggs then this decision would now have moral implications. We could still prefer fried eggs, but we might choose to eat scrambled eggs to avoid the consequences of disobedience. Scripture teaches that our moral choices have eternal implications, as does the decision to trust Christ. In our study, we will focus primarily on the decision to confess our sins, repent, and embrace the truth of the gospel.

The Calvinist teaches that any unbeliever is utterly incapable of choosing to repent and believe the gospel without first being acted on by extraordinary and irresistible outside force. He also teaches that the elect sinner cannot refuse to repent once he is acted upon by the supernatural outside force. This extraordinary external force would be the irresistible grace of God, which He gives only to the elect. As we will see, they teach that this irresistible force is the new birth (aka: regeneration).

Our non-Calvinist will be teaching that an unbeliever is capable of choosing to repent and embrace the gospel without being acted on by extraordinary and irresistible outside force. He teaches that the ability to repent comes by virtue of the common grace that God gives to everyone. It would be much the same as the decision to murder. We each have the ability to murder and we each have the ability to resist committing murder . . . by the common grace of God. This disagreement is a key point in our debate. (Some might even say that it *is* the debate.) I hope to show from Scripture and evident reason that unbelievers possess the power of contrary choice in the context of saving faith . . . and so do believers.

Free will is commonly used to describe the ability to choose what we want from multiple options . . . with minimal external influences. These external influences on our choices will vary in degree. For example, my freedom to drive over the speed limit is somewhat restricted by a speed

limit sign. It is restricted even more by three state troopers with radar guns. My freedom to break the speed limit would be completely lost if there was some kind of electronic device attached to my truck that governed my speed according to the posted speed limit. (Don't laugh. I'll bet there are plenty of people who think this would be a great idea.) But here is an important point: My heart's *desire* to break the speed limit would not necessarily be affected by the speed limit sign, or the three state troopers, or the electronic device. In my heart, I could still *want* to drive over the speed limit. My freedom to break the speed limit would be entirely lost because of the electronic device but the deepest desire of my heart would not be changed. The device would eliminate my ability to drive over the limit but I could still *want* to drive over the limit.

The influences on our actual choices can range from a very subtle suggestion . . . to a polite request . . . to a command . . . to a severe threat, like a gun to the head. Again, free will is a relative term, as there can be varying degrees of freedom, compulsion, and/or restriction in different contexts. This is where the debate can get tricky because we are talking about the ability *to want* to do something. We are not just talking about the ability to do something physically. There is a very real sense in which the heartfelt desire to follow Jesus . . . is essentially following Jesus. They can throw us in prison for following Christ but that can't actually stop us from following Him in our hearts. In his "Confessions", Augustine admitted to the mystery in all of this. He agreed that to go on the road to life is nothing else but the *will* to go on the road to life. He lamented that the mind commands the *body* and it obeys, but the mind commands *itself* and it resists.² I think it is a mystery and it will probably stay a mystery.

This question over the nature of free will is inevitably linked to a discussion of justice. Those who oppose Calvinism insist that there is a very real sense in which our moral decisions must be made with the power of contrary choice in order to be moral decisions. What is the point of commanding people to do something, under the threat of severe punishment, if they can't even do it? Likewise, what is the point of commanding people to resist a particular sin if they cannot possibly resist it? This would render the commandment perfunctory and any judgment of the action nonsensical. It would be like reproofing a rock for being hard.

Yet at the same time, there is a sense in which all of our moral decisions are “determined”. There are reasons for the choices we make. Most of us would find it hard to believe in a truly “causeless choice” . . . especially in the context of repentance from sin. Herein is the mystery. It is no easy task to distinguish precisely how we come to our moral decisions. God is truly sovereign; therefore, He can delegate a limited autonomy (or authority) to each one of us. The Lord could give us varying abilities, and they would not have to be the same for everyone in order for God to judge us fairly. God would never make us choose to sin and He obviously refuses to make us always choose the right thing. The “Potter” is free to delegate this measure of independent ability and responsibility to the “clay”. If God could not delegate moral ability to His fallen creatures then His sovereignty would be needlessly limited. God ultimately decides the scope of our freedom to make choices. This qualifies Him, if you will, to be the perfect Judge of our choices. He knows what each one of us can be held accountable for.

So the big question in our debate regarding “free will” is this: Does an unbeliever enjoy the *freedom, liberty, and ability to repent and believe the gospel?* The Calvinist says no and the non-Calvinist says yes. Both sides of our debate will agree that sinners do not possess the ability to live perfectly or atone for their sin. Both sides agree that sinners do not possess the ability to make themselves born again.

Again, this is something of a philosophical subject and it can get complicated. We will not spend a lot of time on all this but we will spend enough time for the reader to get the idea. Calvinistic scholars are sure that when we “must” believe the truth and can do no other . . . then we are “free” to believe the truth. Likewise, when we can only reject the truth . . . then we are “free” to reject the truth. It sounds a little fishy to me. I think you will see that if this is the foundation on which their entire system stands, then they are standing on some thin philosophical ice. Likewise, there have been non-Calvinists who have attempted to explain *how* we make the choice to repent, but I don’t know if they have fared any better than the Calvinists have. There is obviously not much in the Bible about the intricate working of the human will. Those who are familiar with the debate have heard the terms “Libertarian Free Will” and “Compatibilism.” They are not terms found in Scripture. (I

must say this: I did not give two hoots about “how the mind chooses” until I needed to defend my Calvinism.)

I will be maintaining that the essence of the term “repentance” is destroyed in the Calvinistic view of “free will.” Repentance, by definition, must be independently self-determined. A truly independent repentance is impossible in the Calvinistic understanding. In their system, some sinners can’t choose to repent and the elect sinners must choose to repent. I will maintain that if you absolutely cannot resist repenting then it is not true repentance. I don’t have any explicit biblical texts to support my assertion but neither do the Calvinists have any such texts to support their position.

Both sides of the election debate have spent a lot of time and energy on a term that is not discussed much in the Bible. I like what Mary told the servants at the wedding, regarding Jesus’ instructions:

“Whatever He says to you, do it.” John 2:5

Both sides of the debate over election will likely agree that we should be more concerned with obeying what the Bible says to do, than with understanding what the Bible *does not say* about “how” to do it. The Bible doesn’t tell us explicitly how to chew our food or drive a car but that does not mean we need it to.

Irresistible—This may be the most important word on which the whole debate rests. This debate is not grace vs. works but grace vs. irresistible grace. Irresistible means incapable of being resisted or withheld. It means compulsory, unavoidable, altogether required, or forced by inevitable coercion. An “irresistible” influence could be internal or external. We often use the word in less literal ways. I am sure you can relate to these examples: “The smell of the cookies was irresistible, I had to indulge.” Or we might say: “The puppy was so cute and the kids wanted it so badly, I had no choice.” Some things are not literally irresistible but we use the term to describe something that may be difficult to resist. Like many words, there is some diversity (or lexical range) in the way we use it. Both sides of our debate recognize that God works in us “both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” Phil 2:13 However, the Calvinist says that this working is utterly irresistible

in the elect, whereas our non-Calvinist says that this gracious influence can be resisted. The text is not explicit in either way.

Historically, the term used by Calvinists to describe God's spiritual work in the elect sinner's heart is "irresistible grace." They mean it literally, in the context of salvation. It sounds better than "forced grace," or "imposed grace." (Yet, I did first hear the expression "holy rape of the soul" from one of my favorite Calvinistic teachers. I thought he was kidding.) One of the most difficult tasks for the Calvinist is coming up with a palatable term that accurately describes their view of saving grace. Many Calvinists prefer the term "effectual" grace. It sounds better than "irresistible" but means the same thing. Their problem is not really one of language but of concept. They need a way of presenting the concept of irresistible salvation without calling it such.

If a thing is truly irresistible then it is not volitional or voluntary. Likewise, if something is volitional then it is not irresistible. They are opposites in the common use of the terms.

Adam's influence on us cannot be refused or avoided. We do not choose to be born in sin. It comes naturally and irresistibly at birth, but it does not always make us do the wrong thing. The propensities to tell lies, steal, and commit homosexual acts are irresistibly inherited from Adam. Nevertheless, this does not force us to commit these sins at every possible opportunity. It is plainly evident that each person has also been given the natural moral ability (or power of contrary choice) to avoid many sins. Every one is still capable of telling the truth, respecting the property of others, and avoiding homosexual acts. Unbelievers can make true statements and avoid errors in their checkbooks. Like Adam's influence, this common grace cannot be refused or avoided. It also comes to us, irresistibly, at birth. This grace influences us to live righteously but it does not force us to obey the laws of God. Nobody's perfect. So says the Scripture, and it is corroborated by our personal experience.

Grace—Why would this word need explaining? Doesn't everyone know that in the biblical context it means *underserved favor*? No, actually some people think it always means *irresistible undeserved favor* and that is what our debate is all about. God's grace, like His will, may be resisted in some contexts and be irresistible in other contexts. How we understand the term "grace" is the heart of the matter.

Common grace—explains how all people, who are born in sin, do not always act fully in accordance with their sinful nature. (Some prefer the terms *common favor* or *common love*.) The biblical descriptions of fallen man are grim, but somehow no lost sinner steals, kills, lies, commits adultery, etc, at every possible opportunity. This restraining grace of God is given, in some capacity, to all men; therefore, it is considered common or universal. It also provides an explanation for why the sun shines, and the rain falls, on both the evil and the good. Mt 5:45; Acts 14:17 If we were left to live with only the sinful nature inherited from Adam then we would have self destructed by now, but God is good to all. He imparts some grace to every person. **The differences in understanding and applying the common grace of God are crucial to the whole debate.**

As we will see, a fundamental difference between the two sides of our debate lies in understanding the ability we have to combat the sinful nature which we are born with. Romans 2:14 says that fallen man can do “by nature” the things contained in the law. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says that the “natural man” cannot know the things of the Spirit of God. The apparent friction between these kinds of texts is at the heart of our debate.

Saving Grace—Not all grace is saving grace. A clever wit, a strong healthy body, and Hollywood good looks are often considered the pre-eminent “virtues” in our world. God’s people are often gullible at this point. However, even the most “seeker friendly” churches have not yet declared these traits as saving graces. (You know how this works: “Blessed are the good looking for they shall turn heads.”)

More seriously, even some gifts that are spiritual in nature are not proof of salvation. Judas Iscariot was given spiritual gifts and the power to work miracles, but they did not work toward his salvation. Some false teachers are gifted with good looks, winsome personalities, and intellectual brilliance. They are often skilled communicators but their gifts are misused, and they will serve to make them all the more accountable for their sin and false doctrine.

Everyone agrees that God is ultimately in charge of the grace dispenser. So all grace is sovereign grace. It was God who sovereignly decided that He would give grace to the humble. Prov 3:34; 1 Pet 5:5 Men did not demand that God make this promise. (Someone who is

truly humble would not make such a demand, and this is an important point in our debate.) Historically, Calvinists use the term “sovereign grace” to describe the saving grace that is unconditional and irresistible for the predestined elect. They are talking about grace that cannot be refused. Like Lazarus, when Jesus called him out of his grave.

Repentance and Faith—These terms should not need much definition. They are mentioned together because, in the context of salvation, they are two sides of the same coin. They are distinct but inseparable. Faith in Christ, which is not exercised in the spirit of godly sorrow over sin, is not saving faith. One may look at various aspects of the creation and understand that God is the only rational explanation for their existence, but that is not necessarily saving faith. The Pharisees who rejected Jesus could do that. One may also have the faith to believe God for a particular earthly blessing or physical healing but that is not necessarily saving faith, and may not require repentance from sin. Someone could even believe in the Trinity, Virgin Birth, and second coming of Christ, but still not have saving faith. Even those important doctrines do not guarantee a humble and contrite heart, which trusts the word of God. The seed of God’s Word only flourishes in the soil of a contrite heart. It is impossible to trust the message of the cross unto salvation without humbly admitting that we need such drastic measures to atone for our sin.

Justice and Fairness—This subject is another place where all roads eventually lead in the debate. Like the words freedom and liberty, they can be somewhat elusive. Biblically, the term “just” is often synonymous with the term “righteous.” This helps us to define the terms. God is just. His moral law reflects His righteousness. He does not lie, covet, steal etc. If you never break the law, or if you can blame someone else for your every sin, then you do not have to worry about being punished. (That’s not likely.) We understand justice to be “getting what you deserve.” Justice delivers the appropriate reward or punishment. This is much easier said than done.

Everyone would like to think that God is always fair, but if we can’t agree on a definition of fairness, then it will be awfully hard to agree on how it is to be applied. Jesus taught that unto whom much is given . . . much is required. The Old Testament tithe reflected this

understanding. Someone who had very little income was not expected to give as much as the person who made a great profit during the same period. The poor man was not expected to give more than he was capable of giving. This is an example of how God defines justice in that context.

Here are some key questions: Do you think that God would eternally condemn someone for failing to obey an instruction in which He did not provide the ability to carry out? To put it another way, do you think that an attitude or action must be independently self-determined in order to receive a just moral judgment? Do you think that God would actually blame someone for the sins of their ancestors?

How you answer these questions will go a long way in determining which side of the fence you belong in the debate over election. Be prepared for questions concerning justice, equity, and fairness. **The entire Calvinistic system depends upon proving that it is just of God to hold accountable, and eternally punish, every descendant of Adam, for Adam's sin. (Or, for their own sins which are committed as the unpreventable result of Adam's sin.)** A consistent Calvinist should have no problem with the notion that God could have eternally punished Adam's posterity for eating from the tree, even if we could not prevent Adam from eating off the tree. The rest of us would tend to question the justice of such a decree. The fifth Chapter of Romans is crucial in our study.

Fatalism and determinism—My Calvinistic friends may already be cranky because I have called them a kind of Christian fatalist. My dictionary says fatalism is “The doctrine that all events are subject to fate or inevitable predetermination.” It is “the acceptance of all things and events as inevitable.” Perhaps, all Calvinists are not full-blown fatalists by those definitions. Their fatalism seems to be primarily found in one event. The event, which is subject to inevitable predetermination, would be our eternal destiny. I am confident that by the time we are through, you will be able to see why Calvinists have been accused of fatalism for centuries.

We should gladly acknowledge that Calvinists don't believe in little mythical creatures called Fates, or believe that the stars in the sky irresistibly control life on earth. There is a divine fatalism. They believe that the salvation of the elect is 100% determined by outside influences, namely God.

We all might be able to agree that our level of “self determination” is limited by the degree of authority that God gives to us. No human being enjoys complete self-determination (or autonomy). We live, move, and have our being in God. Acts 17 We should also agree that any liberty of will, which God might give us, is a wonderful gift and a serious responsibility.

Man/Men—unless otherwise noted, I will use this term for mankind. Both male and female. (Sorry ladies, I know it’s not politically correct, but it is much less cumbersome than writing men and women, he or she, and him/her all the time.)

3.6 GROUND RULES FOR THE DEBATE

Those who hold to the Reformed/Calvinistic/Augustinian doctrines of salvation are certainly not amateurs in the Scripture. They are thorough students of the Book. It has been said of many Puritan thinkers that scripture flowed in their veins, and they could not think or speak without referring to a text of the Bible. That may be true but I think they are guilty of a fundamental mistake in interpreting Scripture. Only those who know the Bible very well can get away with subordinating that which is explicitly clear in Scripture to that which might be implied in Scripture. If you can make an implied teaching appear to be an explicit teaching then you can really get some traction . . . but it could be in the wrong direction. **To repeat, we should never let that which is clear in the Bible take a back seat to that which might be inferred in the Bible.**

Both sides of the debate over predestination tend to accuse the other side of violating this principle of interpretation. Both sides of the debate also tend to accuse the other side of “cherry picking” the biblical texts, which best support their position, while ignoring those texts which contradict their position. Perhaps it is possible that God did not intend for “predestination” to be all that clear, and both sides are guilty of reading too much into the Bible.

Both sides of our debate typically declare that we should simply “let Scripture say what it says” and accept it. However, at some point we have to take a stand on what Scripture actually teaches. Platitudes and

rhetoric should not be substituted for actual arguments. We all must be prepared to defend our inferences where Scripture is not explicit.

This whole debate can be further aggravated when we resort to the carnal tactics of the sales floor or courtroom. Both sides can hurt their own cause by trying to pretend that their interpretation is, in every point, the “clear and plain teaching of Scripture.” Smug sounding comments like, “I really don’t know how this could be any clearer” are often unfortunate. They are particularly inappropriate for those who admit that it took years for them to come to their conclusions on the doctrines of grace. (Note to preachers: There is a reason that God did not lead you into a career in acting. Please leave the cheesy drama and feigned passion for the soap opera stars. Just be sincere. Boring and right is still better than the truth delivered insincerely.)

This need for humble sincerity is especially true when the subject involves the omniscience of God or an apparent contradiction in Scripture. Excessive rhetoric makes us look like we enjoy the debate more than the truth. I will be the first to admit that Martin Luther’s wit and sarcasm can be both appealing and intimidating. Some hyperbole and rhetoric can be useful. Luther is said to have referred to the “Church” as a drunken German peasant trying to get on his mule. That is both funny and instructional. Excessive rhetoric can be entertaining but it can also make us look silly, if not two-faced. This is especially true if we have already admitted that the subject of election is difficult, and not every aspect can be defended purely by biblical texts.

If we were so confident of the clear teaching of Scripture on election then we probably would not need anyone to write books on it. If we need to read a dozen other heavyweight books, in addition to the Bible, to come to our conclusions on election, then we should be honest enough to admit that the Bible is not crystal clear on every aspect of the debate. If any book (including this one) is needed to clarify a doctrine then maybe we should acknowledge that the clarification is not all that necessary, in God’s mind. God might really like the way the Bible turned out.

Please don’t misunderstand. I know the presence of false teachers requires us to contend for the truth, and this may require us to write books, which help interpret Scripture. Nevertheless, we should not concede that the Canon of Scripture isn’t capable of defending itself against all attacks. We must guard against becoming Protestant Popes.

Biblically literate and Spirit filled believers should be able to stop the mouths of error. I believe all people have the right to interpret the Bible for themselves . . . as long as they get it right.

3.7 WHO IS THE BIBLE WRITTEN FOR?

Lastly, it is important at the outset of our study to acknowledge that not every Bible teacher believes that Scripture is written for everybody . . . that is believers and unbelievers alike. As an example, John MacArthur, a well known Pastor, and Bible teacher, in his message entitled, “What to Look for in a Pastor” said the following:

The Bible was not written for non-believers.

You can't teach the Bible to non-believers, they will reject it.

You cannot teach the Scriptures to non-believers.³

These quotes seem somewhat puzzling or careless. John appears to be teaching that a non-believer must become a believer without the Scriptures, but I don't think he actually believes it. I would be interested to know how unbelievers, who visit John's church, could become *Christian* believers without teaching them the Bible. He seems to be saying that unbelievers can become believers without hearing and/or believing the truth contained in the Scriptures. Perhaps he believes that unbelievers can become born again apart from the word of God . . . but I doubt it. These comments may seem confusing but as we progress in our study, you will understand why Dr. MacArthur teaches that the Bible was not written for unbelievers. He needs it to be true in order to support his Calvinistic views of election.

It is plain that the Bible is written primarily *to* professing believers but it is *for* everyone. This includes hypocrites, skeptics, and everyone who has not been exposed to its truth. It is the job of God's people to teach the truth to those who have not heard it, or doubt it. Our job, or commission, as the church of believers is to go into the world and make Christian disciples. This is not possible without teaching them the words of Jesus. We would not use the words of Plato, Mark Twain, or Eminem to make disciples of Jesus. If you wanted to persuade people

to follow Muhammad then you would, most likely, use the teachings of Muhammad to persuade them. We use Jesus' teachings to get people to believe in Jesus. As we will see, this is actually an important and somewhat controversial point in our debate.

Again, the Bible is written primarily to believers but it is written for believers and unbelievers. God's word is for every person, whether they want to hear it or not. When the Creator speaks, He expects us to listen or face the consequences. For those who need this to be verified, the following texts will help prove the point. Ps 49:1-2; Ps 50:16-17; Is 45:22; Mt 4:17; Mt 7:24-29; Luke 8:15; John 20:30-31;

4.0 Fleshing It Out—Agreements & Disagreements

Ok, let's get back to the new baby. We should examine the two positions in a little more depth. To reiterate, both pastors share a common biblical dilemma or conundrum. **The problem is this: How can salvation be all of grace if it has a single condition that the guilty sinner must voluntarily meet?** (The condition, again, is repentance and faith.) This problem is central to the whole debate. We know that salvation is undeserved. Yet we also know that salvation has a required condition attached to it. So, how can we reconcile this apparent contradiction? As we will see, the Calvinistic solution lies more in how faith is made possible. The non-Calvinistic solution lies more in the nature of faith itself.

In this chapter, we will put some flesh on the bare bones differences between the two sides. In the following chapters we will look, in more detail, at the Bible texts, which each side uses to defend their respective positions. I repeat . . . the repetition is deliberate.

I hope you will never forget the bare bones differences between the two sides. In fact, let's do a short review. For all of the wrangling, the basic difference between the two positions is embarrassingly simple. The Calvinist says that every essential aspect of salvation is completely irresistible for the chosen sinners, while the non-Calvinist says that salvation is actually possible for every sinner but it can be resisted.

All the words . . . on all the pages . . . in all the books . . . support this simple Calvinistic assertion: If you were unconditionally chosen to be a believer then you will be saved . . . you cannot be lost. If you were not chosen to be a believer then you will not be saved . . . you cannot be saved.

There is some disagreement on both sides of our debate over what happens to children, who die in childhood, and the mentally handicapped. We will look into that question as we go along. We will not dance around it. It is a key aspect of the debate that is often avoided as too sensitive or unknowable.

4.1 ASSURANCE OF SALVATION IS NOT THE SAME AS SALVATION

The question “What must I do to be saved?” is not the same as asking, “What must I do to be sure of my salvation?” The answers to these questions are not identical. They overlap, but they are not entirely the same. It is very important, at the outset, to make sure we clarify the differences between salvation and the assurance of salvation. Both sides agree that being born again is essential for salvation. The forgiveness of sin and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness are essential to salvation. Faith, with repentance, is essential for salvation, at least among adults. Anyone can know that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world, but this will not do guilty sinners any good without personally trusting the “good news” with a faith that works through love. Gal 5:6 The believer’s sincere faith is how God *justly* imputes the righteousness of Christ to them. Rom 3, 4, 5 God will not impute the righteousness of Christ to the hypocrite “believer” whose faith is not genuine.

Assurance is not essential to salvation. One can be saved, but have some doubt about it. For example, I doubt Peter felt very “eternally secure” after the rooster crowed, but most would agree that he was actually a believer on the night in which he denied knowing Jesus. It was just very hard to tell at that time in his life. As you will recall, Peter was swearing that he didn’t know Jesus. (Let those who have never been ashamed of the gospel, under much less threatening circumstances, cast the first stone.)

Paul was also concerned that the Corinthians may have believed in vain. He exhorted them not to receive the saving grace of God in vain. In addition, Paul was concerned that he may have labored in vain among the Galatians as they were looking to the law to save them. Paul also spoke of false brethren. 1 Cor 15:1-2; 2 Cor 6:1; Gal 2:4; 3:4

The letter of 1 John describes the proofs of saving faith, and Peter instructs believers on how they may be sure of their salvation by adding several key qualities to their faith. 2 Peter 1:5-11

The writer of Hebrews warns that there will be some who look very much like believers (even Christian believers) but aren’t. They may experience the grace of God in many remarkable ways . . . only to fall away. Heb 6

In his first epistle, John describes the kind of faith that is genuine and saving. He instructs us how to recognize the birthmarks of the spiritual rebirth. It is not always easy for us to tell the genuine from the pretender, but love hopes all things. It seems the more we actually love people the more we are inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt regarding the sincerity of their faith. When our own kids get in trouble, we tend to give them the benefit of the doubt, in terms of their culpability, but when it is someone else's kids, we are not always quick to assume the best.

Faith is essential to salvation. Faith is also essential to the *assurance* of salvation. Virtually all Christians have historically believed that it is possible to be saved but not be sure of it. Likewise, it is possible to assume with "confidence" that you are saved but not be. We know, from Scripture, that simply professing to be a sincere believer does not mean that you are a sincere believer. Both sides of our debate typically agree that faith without works is dead. Mt 7:21-23; Mt 25:41-46; James 2:17

As we will eventually see, there are several necessary ingredients to enjoying a healthy assurance of salvation. These ingredients are not always easily discerned in the life, and this is why there can be real question about someone's salvation. Surely, the Lord knows His sheep, but it is often hard for us to tell who is truly in the fold. There are people who claim to be among God's "sheep" that are lost and unforgiven. Their faith is spiritual "fools gold." In addition, there are weak, or timid, Christians who are nevertheless real believers. They cannot enjoy the same degree of assurance as those who are mature and established in their faith, but they are no less justified. 1 Cor 3:15

Eventually, I think you will see how the Calvinistic views of salvation can have an adverse affect on our assurance. We will see how Calvinists often neglect and/or marginalize the power of the common grace of God. The Calvinistic views have encouraged a dangerous superficiality and "easy believism" in the church. There are those among the ranks of Calvinism who logically teach that our obedience, fruitfulness, and spiritual growth do not have any bearing on our assurance. They teach that we must be assured of our salvation *before* we can obey the commandments, bear fruit, and grow in grace. Nevertheless, the Bible teaches that we must be obedient, bear fruit, and grow in order to enjoy the full assurance of salvation.

4.2 PRAYING FOR THE BABY'S SALVATION

It is time to pray for the new baby. Contrary to what you might assume, the Calvinistic pastor may lead in a prayer for the child's salvation. He will pray, even though he does not believe that his prayers could actually work to *alter* the predestined outcome. He is sure that God has already decided where the child will spend eternity but he does not know what God's choice was. He believes that the outcome has been decreed by God and will ultimately be determined by God . . . no ifs, ands, or buts. His destiny would not merely have been *ordained* by God but it would have been *irresistibly decreed* by God.

The Calvinistic pastor knows that if the child were not elect then he would be praying in opposition to the will of God, but he may genuinely desire the child to be saved and prays to that end. (When all is said and done, we will all have prayed for many things that were not the will of God.) This pastor might hope that his prayers would be an indication that God has already chosen the new baby for eternal life, or be praying for other reasons.

It doesn't make much sense for the Calvinist to pray for the lost since he believes that God has already decreed who is to be saved . . . immutably. His position on predestination says that the eternal destiny of the baby's soul is a done deal. It can't be changed. His doctrine makes it possible to pray for the salvation of someone for whom God has no intention of saving. Yet, his prayers make it look as though he does not think that the child's eternal destiny has already been predetermined. His prayer makes him look like a non-Calvinist.

The second pastor will also pray for the child's salvation. He does not believe that his prayers, alone, will determine the outcome, but he does believe that they may somehow influence the outcome. It may also seem curious that he prays for the baby's salvation since he is sure that God already desires to save the child and will be working to that end, throughout his life. **As stated before, he believes that God has sovereignly placed the ball of responsibility in the hands of every sinner who is mentally capable of understanding the truth.** One might think that the non-Calvinist would simply spend his time passionately speaking to unbelievers and trying to convince them of the truth. Nevertheless, he will pray for God to have patience with

them and to open their spiritual eyes of understanding. When he prays he will sound like a Calvinist.

Contrary to the Calvinist, he is confident that his prayer for the child's salvation is undoubtedly the desired will of God. However, he acknowledges that God's benevolent provision to save every soul would not guarantee that everyone will be saved. The non-Calvinist pastor believes that God has sovereignly decreed that every adult will play an essential, independent, and decisive role in his or her own salvation . . . or damnation. He insists that the sinner's role is dependant upon God's decision to provide a way of salvation. If Jesus did not go to the cross and if God did not promise salvation to those who repent and believe the truth then no culpable sinner could be saved. The non-Calvinistic pastor believes that God actually desires the baby's salvation but He *refuses* to save irresistibly; therefore, his prayer might seem perfunctory also.

Here, both pastors run in to the mysterious merging of God's sovereignty and the responsibility of man, so they both pray for babies and lost souls, and that is a good thing. They are in good company. Jesus and the Apostle Paul did the same thing. John 17:21; Rom10:1; Acts 26:29 The Calvinist is in the more awkward position of possibly wanting someone to be saved who God has not chosen for salvation. This would happen anytime believing parents pray for a child that is supposedly not chosen for salvation. As we will see, Isaac and Rebekah would have had this problem with their firstborn son, Esau. That is, if the Calvinists are correct.

If you've heard the story of Augustine's conversion, then you know that his mother, Monica, was said to be tenacious in prayer for her playboy son. I doubt she was a "Calvinist." I doubt she believed that Augustine's destiny had already been decided and could not be altered. Too much philosophical speculation about God's omniscience can quench the spirit of our prayers.

4.3 WHAT MUST GOD DO . . . FOR ME TO BE SAVED?

The answer to this question is a list, and it is largely agreed upon by both sides of our debate. Both sides of our study agree that sinners must be redeemed, cleansed, justified, born again, chosen, and adopted into God's family or we will not be saved. These things are not in

our power to accomplish. God has not given sinners the power to eternally redeem themselves or make themselves born again. These are aspects of the plan of salvation, which God alone can perform. As we will see, both sides will claim to agree that our only contribution to our individual salvation is repentance and faith. Culpable sinners are entirely at the mercy of God for their salvation. Humble faith does not, in and of itself, actually save anyone. It does not atone for sin, nor does it make anyone born again. Only Jesus can atone for our sin. Only God can make us born again.

The question before us regarding the destiny of the new baby is not whether God is sovereign or not. The question before us is how does God choose to use His sovereign control? Both sides agree that God is sovereign. Part of God's divine prerogative is that He doesn't have to do something if He doesn't want to. God is free to delegate authority if He wants to. If sovereignty were our only concern in understanding salvation then we could suppose that the condition of salvation might be straight teeth or helping the poor. God could sovereignly decree that whoever says his prayers 3 times a day, and crawls up the church steps (while kissing each one) will be saved.

God could sovereignly decree that salvation would have no human condition at all. God's sovereignty, alone, would certainly not prohibit Him from simply snatching some of the people from the fire in Adam's house and leaving the rest to burn. God could pick many methods of salvation if sovereignty was His only consideration. He could decree that the condition of salvation would be humble faith. Both sides of our debate agree that God is sovereign, but they also believe that God is always holy and just. Both sides agree that the LORD is a loving God. If God were not holy, just, and good then His sovereignty would be a terrifying attribute. As it is, we can all be glad that God is both sovereign over all things, and benevolent to everyone.

We should also acknowledge that mankind did not demand to be justified by faith alone. It was God's idea, and it is not as easy or automatic as many would lead us to believe. Any preacher who says, "All you have to do is believe" misrepresents the nature of biblical repentance and faith. It is true that we don't have to keep the law to be saved but keeping the faith is not easy. We should never suggest that the way of repentance and faith is easy. The Bible teaches, in many places, that the road to life is difficult. If God wanted us to understand that

faith is easy then He would not have used farming, running, building homes, fighting, and warfare as illustrations to describe the life of faith.
John 6:27; Heb 12:1; Mt 7:24; Eph 6:10-20

If the life of faith was easy then God could have likened it unto taking a nap or a leisurely stroll. The biblical faith is not like sitting on the couch with a remote control watching television. Too many souls become disillusioned because someone “doing evangelism” told them that it was easy to be saved. The life of penitent faith is like swimming upstream or against a rip tide. Any time we let up, we go backwards. Justification by faith is one of the reasons that we know the Bible is inspired by God. If the Bible were written by men, it would teach a way of salvation that could be attained by obeying some easy commandments or keeping some religious traditions.

Again, there is no place in the Bible where we find the command to “atone yourselves and be saved.” God has not given us that option or ability. Likewise, there is no text in the Bible where we are told to “born again ourselves.” That is poor grammar and bad doctrine. We are told to humble ourselves and believe the truth . . . over and over again. Before the foundation of the world, God sovereignly devised a way to be merciful to every penitent sinner without compromising His perfect justice. It is the way of faith and it is the gift of God. This plan cost Him dearly but He sincerely loves every one of His wayward “offspring.” Acts 17:28-29; Eph 2:8-9

4.4 ORIGINAL SIN

OK, back to the baby again. All this talk about “salvation” infers a problem. What’s the kid’s problem? How much trouble can you get into as a newborn baby? Or even before birth, for goodness sakes?

The subject of original sin is one of the most important aspects of the entire debate. Here again, we must contend with a term that can be interpreted and defined differently. Both sides of our debate use the term “original sin,” but they don’t mean it in the same way. Both sides of our debate agree that we are sinners, by nature and by choice. Let’s look a little further into the heart of the controversy. We will return to it in more detail in Chapter 7.

Both pastors agree: Scripture teaches that the infant has been born with a sinful nature. He inherited it from the first man Adam. (Some

prefer to call this “inherited sin” instead of “original sin” but their definition is the same.) It is similar to a baby who has been born with some kind of handicap or disease. This disease is universal in every person. It is spiritual in nature but it will have physical indications, chief among them are sickness, aging and physical death. The child will soon sin ignorantly and deliberately. Mommy or Daddy may deny it, but the truth only hurts when it should. The child has been born as a sinner and the proof will be forthcoming and obvious. Nevertheless, as the child grows he will demonstrate some ability to know the difference between right and wrong.

Even with the worst of parents, the child will also demonstrate some *ability* to do both right and wrong. This is amazing given the biblical descriptions of the human heart. The child won’t need much encouragement in the practice of being selfish. As you probably know, the biblical descriptions of the human heart leave one wondering how anyone ever does anything except sin . . . every moment of every day. The manifestation of sin shows up more in some people than in others, but it’s evident in every person.

Some children grow up, as so called, “good kids” like Daniel or Jonathan. On the other hand, some grow up like Cain or Absalom. It is unreasonable to blame their parents for every act of sin. It may even be unreasonable to blame the individuals themselves for every act of sin . . . entirely. It is unreasonable to put all the blame on Adam. It is certainly unreasonable to blame God. Sin is a complex problem. Nevertheless, it stands to reason that God will be able to sort out the appropriate blame for each and every sin, even if we can’t. He sees the big picture and the secrets of every heart. This can be both frightening and comforting . . . it depends on the secret.

Both pastors agree that as the baby matures into a small child he will commit sins of thought and deed that seem completely unpreventable, even involuntary. He will also sin deliberately. Nevertheless, as he continues to grow up he will demonstrate an ability to resist many opportunities to sin. This proves that some sin is quite preventable. Sometimes, he will “by nature do the things in the law.” On one day he will steamroll over temptation like a bug in the road, and yet, on another day he will cave in to sin as if he is powerless against it . . . and loves every minute of it. It is something of a mystery. He will have a functioning conscience, which will both accuse and excuse. This

logically infers that He won't do *everything* wrong. He will fall woefully short of the perfect righteousness required for entrance into heaven, but he will be capable of doing some things right. Rom. 2:14-15 You don't have to know about Jesus to relate to this constant struggle for moral supremacy in your life. You don't need the Bible. It is universal. It is obvious. It is relentless.

God is absolutely too holy and His standards are too high to allow sinners to go on living forever in this earthly life. Thanks to Adam's big sin in the garden, everyone will break God's laws. Therefore, everyone is mortal. We will face physical death, at the least. Gen 2-3, Rom 5. Both pastors agree on this. Because of Adam's sin, the newborn child is born with a powerful inward propensity to sin, to which he will yield. In spite of God's common grace, which influences and enables him to avoid sins . . . he will sin, and he will sin on purpose. As a result he will die. They both agree on this much. The little baby has a big problem. Fortunately, they both agree that God has devised a big solution to the big problem. The solution is born of God's love and it is the Good News of Christ. It is the great theme of the Bible, but the Calvinistic pastor is not sure if God really wants to solve the new baby's problem. He teaches that God might want to leave the baby "in Adam" with no real hope in Christ. This is where the two pastors differ.

As already noted, and will be seen in more detail, the Calvinistic pastor takes the effects of Adam's fall a big step further. **In the historical Calvinistic system, it is to be understood that the baby is at fault for being born with this original sin nature.** He inherited Adam's *guilt*. In his opinion, every baby who is born into the race already deserves to be eternally punished *at birth*. This is because of what Adam did in the Garden. (I know . . . it doesn't make sense to me either. I'm sorry I ever believed it.) The typical Calvinist believes that Adam was acting as the representative head of the entire human race when he ate from the forbidden tree. Therefore, the Calvinist concludes that all humanity chose to sin . . . in Adam. This means, to Calvinists, that we not only suffer the consequences of Adam's sin, but we are guilty of committing it as well. In their view, the guilt of Adam's sin is *imputed* to everyone born into Adam's race. (Jesus excluded. Adam was not His "biological" father.)

This is a key distinction. In Chapter 7, we will let a few Calvinists speak for themselves on this point. For now, we will only note the Westminster Confession. Chapter 6, Section 3 says,

They [our first parents/Adam and Eve] being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed; and the same death in sin, and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.¹

As we will see, this is how Calvinists interpret Romans 5. This view of original sin is not limited to Presbyterians. This same teaching is found among some Baptists. (See Chapter 6, Section 3 of the Philadelphia Confession of Faith.) Also, C. H. Spurgeon, a Baptist, includes the guilt of Adam's first sin in his definition of original sin. (See Question 17 in Spurgeon's Catechism.)

Historically, some Calvinists (and those influenced by them) would teach that any babies who die in childhood would perish in hell. It is a logical conclusion since they would be born guilty of sin and were never given the grace of repentance and faith. Their rejection by God would not be based on any particular sins, which God would foresee in their own lives. Other Calvinists would say that if a baby is one of the elect, and dies in childhood, then he or she would be saved. Elect babies would not need to repent and believe the truth. (This makes some sense in the context of their system. In their system, repentance and faith are a result of their election and not the cause of their election.)

Still other Calvinists would teach that if *any* child dies in childhood they would be saved. In their view, childhood death could only occur among the *elect*. The non-elect could not die in childhood. God would preserve their earthly lives until they could be held accountable for their "own" inevitable rejection of the truth. I'm afraid the hearts and creeds of these Calvinists are in clear conflict.

Some will insist that we just can't know what will happen to children who die, but God can be trusted to do the right thing. After all, He made the oceans and rainforests. Again, we will continue to look more into the question of children who die, as we progress. I trust you can see why this is an important issue in our study.

You may be sure that passions run high over this aspect of our debate, especially as it relates to children and the handicapped. As you

can imagine, this is where Calvinists may shift in their seats, swallow hard, turn to Romans 5 (or Psalm 51) to defend their point. They strive to show that it is biblical to impute Adam's guilt to everyone. Some may try to explain how it could be just (or fair) but most don't bother. They leave us with the necessary assumption that it must be fair because God's word teaches it, and God is always just. This awkward combination of misinterpretation and sound reasoning is how cults have gotten started.

Our non-Calvinist strongly disagrees. This is a place where he accuses the Calvinist of getting carried away with *inferences*. This is also, where some non-Calvinists may start spitting . . . at the Calvinists. Others simply shrug it off and wonder how such brilliant people could come to such a wrongheaded conclusion. Worse yet, are those who dismiss the Bible altogether as another man-made religious book which could not have been inspired by God. They assume that the real God could not be guilty of such obvious injustice, and they use this as a reason to dismiss the gospel altogether. Again, I trust you can agree that our doctrine is important.

The non-Calvinistic pastor would say that the baby may have been "in Adam" but he was not actually Adam. He might also say that we may have been 'in' our biological father but we are not the same person. He might suggest that this would be a crude kind of corporate punishment, which would impugn the righteousness of our all-wise God. His best arguments, however, are to point out that the Bible never calls Adam our "representative" before God. Adam is certainly not our mediator. There is only One Mediator between God and man; it is not Adam. 1 Tim 2:5 Adam is never called our "Federal Head," our "surety," or even a "public person" anywhere in the Bible. The Bible never says that anyone is born dead in sin. Our non-Calvinistic pastor insists that the Bible never says that the guilt of Adam's sin is imputed to his descendants. In fact, the Bible clearly says that sin is not imputed where there is no law. Rom 5:13 Evident reason would say that a newborn baby could not be justly held accountable to any law . . . especially the law that was only given to Adam.

Scripture never says, "When Adam ate of the tree we all ate of the tree." **Our non-Calvinistic pastor will say that we are born in sin as a consequence of Adam's transgression, but we are not born responsible for Adam's transgression.** We are not "detestable" to

God and worthy of eternal punishment from the moment we are born. We are not accountable for Adam's sin as if we committed it. This is a major point of disagreement between the two sides. If our non-Calvinistic pastor is right, then historical Calvinism hits the iceberg. The whole system sinks.

There will be much more to say on this point as we continue. For now, I will only add that it would be hard to find an instance where a child's father commits a crime and a judge sentences his kids as if they had done the crime. (Especially, if the kids hadn't been born yet.) Any judge who tries to pull a stunt like that, in some places, better leave town, or get a gun and a big dog. It might be time for some good old-fashioned vigilante justice.

To be clear, we do see, all too often and all around the world, that if a child's father (or mother) commits a crime, the children may suffer *consequentially*. This could be true even if they are unborn. However, the children of criminals don't have to do time in prison, pay the fine, or otherwise make restitution for that crime. They incur no blame or punitive culpability because they did not commit the crime.

The children of liars, drug addicts, the sexually immoral, cultists, atheists, alcoholics, and the covetous are all affected by their parents' sin, and sometimes tragically. But the children are not held culpable until they actually break God's law on their own. Then God imputes the guilt of their sin to their own account. The child of an uneducated drug-using prostitute will suffer because of the sins of his mother. Likewise, the child of a well-educated, proud, and greedy materialist will suffer as well.

Surely, this is one reason why God has such hatred for sin. Sin is not only offensive to Him but it has a terribly detrimental effect on others. (It's like the poor chicken in the hen house that lives in a cage on the bottom row . . . if you know what I mean.)

Thankfully again, both pastors believe that God had a plan for deliverance all along. *God never planned to leave everyone in this perilous condition in Adam.* This should help us to see that God really knew what He was doing by permitting the cancer of sin to enter His perfect world, and make such an awful mess. We can all breathe a collective sigh of relief. God planned to permit the fall but He also planned the remedy for the fall, before the foundation of the world.

(Allow me to make a very important digression here. I need to comment, again, on the importance of how we use words. The above statement, “*God never planned to leave everyone in this perilous condition in Adam*,” should also serve as an example of how sentences can be unclear and present two very different meanings. You can see how both of our pastors could agree with the statement: “God never planned to leave *everyone* in this perilous condition in Adam”, but they would mean it quite differently. It is a misleading statement for the Calvinistic pastor if it suggests that God’s plan of deliverance was *for everyone* in the human race. As we have seen, his view of unconditional election teaches that God never intended to deliver everyone. He has made no such plan . . . according to the Calvinists.

Our second pastor has no problem with the universal implications of the statement. He believes that God has made a good faith and *universal* provision for the salvation of everyone born into Adam’s race. But the plan has a necessary condition for those who can be held accountable for their own sin. This is an easy example of how words can be used to clarify or obscure. We must beware of these kinds of double meanings in our discussion of election. They tend to be found quite often. Those who are skilled with words can make “yes” seem like “no,” and “expensive” seem like “cheap.” In this debate, they can make “free” look like “bound” and “bound” look like “free.” They can make “irresistibly compelled” look like “voluntary.” We must try to be as precise as possible and still be coherent. That is a big part of the debate over election.)

For now, regarding mankind’s predicament “in Adam,” let’s note the distinction between *consequences* and *culpability* and press on. If this is not clear now, it should make more sense later. Remember, we are talking about the God who made and sustains the cosmos, including all life on earth. He designed and implemented the galaxies. He is the architect of DNA. He made the water cycle. It stands to reason that he knows what He is doing and how to handle the problem of evil. There should be no doubt that God knows what He is doing even if we do not perfectly understand the nature of evil in the human heart. We should all be able to agree that we must not point the finger of guilt at God simply because men, women, and children suffer the effects of evil.

4.5 THE LAW IS GOOD, BUT . . .

Both pastors agree that sin is defined as the lack of conformity to, or transgression of, the law of God. By the law is the knowledge of sin. Therefore, all sin is a manifestation of unbelief in the revealed will of God. Rom 3:20; 7:7 Sin is lawlessness and we don't make the rules. Both pastors agree that we must not let public opinion or the "market" decide what is right and wrong. 1 John 3:4 They agree that God has written the basic laws of morality on everyone's heart; He has given everyone a conscience that excuses and accuses us regarding that law. Rom 2:15 We all live in the realm of "ought" and "ought not". They also agree that the invisible attributes of God are seen in the creation, by all sinners. Rom 1:20 Even those who have never been exposed to the Scriptures understand the basic principles of right and wrong.

As an example, we know that Abimelech, a pagan king who lived long before God gave the 10 Commandments to Moses, was naturally aware of the truth about adultery. He knew that it was wrong to take another man's wife. The Bible did not exist when Abimelech lived but he demonstrated how the law of God was written on his heart. Abraham made a common mistake that is often made by those who have been given greater revelation from God. He assumed that the fear of God was not in Gerar, so he lied about Sara. Gen 20 Peter and many Jews made the same mistake with Cornelius and the Gentiles. Acts 10 The Queen of Sheba was able to recognize Solomon's wisdom. 1 Kings 10 We need to recognize that the fear of God exists in places which have had no Bible. It may be very primitive and they still need the Bible . . . but the law of God has been published in every heart and His law is spiritual in nature. Rom 7:14 (More on this in Chapter 10.)

Both of our pastors also agree that obedience to the law is not a viable way of salvation. They both know that in order to obtain eternal life we would have to keep the law perfectly and no natural descendant of Adam ever has. Everyone has deliberately broken the law at some point. Like a hole in the bottom of a bucket, it doesn't matter where it's punctured, it won't hold water. We all sin deliberately, in spite of God's grace; therefore, our condemnation is justly deserved. James 2:10; Rom 2 Jesus would be the only marvelous exception and that qualifies Him to be our Savior.

Salvation through keeping the law was never God's plan for anyone born in sin. They agree on this. If Adam had kept the law, which God gave him then he never would have needed to be forgiven of anything. He would not have become dead in sin. He would never have needed the "washing of regeneration."

Both pastors may generally agree that unbelievers don't break God's law at every possible opportunity. They know that God must, somehow, be restraining man's wickedness and enabling *some* obedience to His laws. If He didn't then things would be much worse. God would never need to destroy mankind. We would do it ourselves. We do see examples in Scripture of men who were not apparent believers making right judgments and good moral decisions. Even if you rightly believe that men don't always sin because it is in their selfish best interests not to, that ability had to come from somewhere. It did not come from the corrupt flesh within them. Nothing good dwells in our flesh. Rom 7:18; John 6:63 Nevertheless, both Jesus and the biblical writers acknowledged that which was good in sinners, even unbelieving sinners. Mt 7:11; Acts 26:3, Rom 2:14

Both pastors also agree that partial obedience to the law cannot justify us, or atone for our sins. Contrary to the views common in all parts of the world, one good work does not atone for one bad work before the real God. In fact, many good works, which may be done by a sinner, cannot atone for one bad one. This common theory is popular among sinners who want to ease their conscience without real repentance. They desire to set the terms for their own forgiveness. These "terms" tend to be good works, which they can accomplish without any help from God or man. Both of our pastors agree that God is our Creator and He is offended by every single sin of every single person. It is *His law* we have broken, therefore it is *His right* to set any terms and conditions for reconciliation. If I were to be caught breaking the speed limit in my truck, I do not get to set the penalty. The government of that place will set the terms of my reconciliation. I don't get a vote. I pay the fine or I get deeper in trouble.

Here is another point of agreement. Both pastors agree that the minimum standard for acceptance into heaven is absolute moral perfection. Unrighteousness is not allowed. To lower the standard would require God to stop being holy Himself, and heaven would be a place with sin. Sin stinks to God and He doesn't want heaven to

smell like a septic tank. Who could blame Him for that? Therefore, the only hope for a sinner will be in God's mercy. Justice alone won't save but justice cannot be neglected in the terms of salvation. Any plan of salvation must satisfy the demands of God's holy justice. The only hope for a sinner will be to obtain a perfect righteousness . . . somehow.

God's dilemma, if you will, was coming up with a plan of salvation that is both merciful and just. Gladly, both pastors agree on this teaching. We have to be washed by the forgiveness of sin, and have a perfect righteousness to get into heaven. That is the price of admission and none of us can pay it by ourselves. This distinction is unique among religions and worldviews. Jesus must carry us to heaven or we will not go. Indeed, the law is for the proud and the gospel is for the brokenhearted.

It has been eloquently said that on the cross of Christ . . . justice and mercy kissed. The demands of God's justice and His desire for mercy both get satisfied by the sacrifice of His only begotten Son. Both of our pastors agree, ". . . the just shall live by his faith." Hab 2:4 **But as you might be starting to see, the Calvinistic system renders faith something of a moot point.** The Calvinist sees faith as an inevitable result of unconditional election. It is not really an *independent* condition of salvation. I think his logic gets a little shaky here, but he is armed with an explanation. We will pick up this discussion, in more detail, later on.

4.6 ATONEMENT

Again, both pastors agree that the child will not keep the law properly. Therefore, he will need an appropriate atonement for his sins. The crucifixion of Christ is the only appropriate sacrifice that is acceptable to God. No animal sacrifices can eternally redeem the sinner. Heb 10:4 No personal sacrifices of time or money can contribute to anyone's redemption. Both agree that sinners cannot pay a single "cent" towards the actual payment of their sin debt before God. Partial obedience to the law can't redeem. Helping the poor and other good deeds cannot redeem. Going to church cannot redeem. Godly sorrow over our sin cannot redeem. Only the blood of Christ redeems.

There is simply nothing in the Bible about anyone, or anything, except the cross of Christ that can eternally wash away sin. It may appear that water baptism actually washes away sin, but it merely symbolizes, outwardly, what the blood actually does, inwardly, when it is imputed to the believing sinner. Both of our pastors agree on this. It would be deeply insulting to the cross work of Christ to suggest that our sacrifices (or baptism) could actually atone for our sin.

Also, another important agreement, here, is that both pastors acknowledge that our sin debt is owed to God . . . not the Devil. The Devil was conquered by Jesus' death on the cross. He was not paid off like a kidnapper who releases his hostages after the ransom is paid. The Devil does not win in God's world. Instead of being satisfied . . . the Serpent gets stomped on. Christ's ransom pays the demands of *God's* justice.

Our non-Calvinistic pastor insists that the death of Jesus propitiates God's wrath for the whole world. However, this would not in and of itself, impute the atonement to every adult sinner. The Calvinistic pastor would not agree. Both pastors will appear to agree that the application of Christ's atonement is accomplished through our faith. Rom 5:1; 1 John 2:2; Hab 2:4; Rom 4

Our pastors agree that the atonement of the cross is therefore a requirement of salvation. But it is a requirement that is met by Christ alone. The sinner plays no role in the actual atonement. He only plays a role in the *application* of the atonement. God, the Judge, responds to our guilty plea of faith by imputing the perfect righteousness of Christ to the believer's life. He is only obliged to do so because of His promise. It is not because of any inherent obligation to forgive our sins.

Sinners could repent and seek God's mercy every moment of every day, but if Jesus does not go to the cross then we are lost forever, our godly sorrow notwithstanding. If God forgives sinners of their sin then we can be sure that it will be a *just* forgiveness. Likewise, the unbeliever receives a just punishment. These are basic points of agreement and more reasons why this is a debate among the family of true Christians.

Note also, the very fact that we are speaking about *justice* infers that the determination of our eternal destinies is *conditional*. If there were no conditions for hell then we would not need to speak of justice.

It wouldn't matter. Justice would be irrelevant. We don't speak of "justice" where there are no requirements or conditions of compliance. We do not speak of justice for rocks. They have no ability to make moral choices; therefore, they are not judged by any law. Rocks are not required to repent or believe anything in order to be forgiven. They have no relationship to the law.

Both of our pastors also agree that the death of Christ is a *substitutionary* atonement. As the eternal Word, Jesus agreed to come and lay down His life as for the sins of the world. No one really took His life from Him. He gave it freely. It is God's law that we have broken and He has the right to determine what kind of redemption would be acceptable. This is not the case in earthly courts. Human judges are required to apply the appropriate punishment for crimes. They do not have the authority to give amnesty even if someone offers to take the punishment of another. The LORD God has the right to set the terms of amnesty when His law is broken. We will be forever grateful that He devised a plan whereby the demands of His justice *and* His desire for mercy can both be accomplished. Jesus is God incarnate. He agreed to take the punishment for our sin, as if He had broken His own law. God would not be forcing someone else to be our Scapegoat. This is why Charles Wesley could be correct, in one very important sense, when he wrote the controversial line:

Amazing love how can it be? That thou My God shouldst die for me! ²

In one sense, these words would be absurd, even blasphemous, because God could not die. Yet, in another sense, they capture the immense depth of God's love for us. They also reveal how Christ's substitution could be just.

The primary disagreement in this aspect of the debate over election is regarding the *purpose* or *intent* of the cross. Thus the question: For whom did Jesus intend to die? It may seem like a war of words more than a substantive disagreement, but it's not. The confusion and disagreement lies in understanding how Jesus could have paid the sin debt for unbelievers who perish in hell. Both sides agree that the cross redeems all sincere believers. Both sides agree that Jesus died for sinners of all nationalities and ethnic groups.

In spite of a boatload of biblical texts, which certainly appear to teach that Jesus died for every sinner, the Calvinistic pastor believes that Jesus only died for those whom God had already chosen to have faith. In the true Calvinist's mind, there is no sense in which Jesus died to redeem every sinner. In his understanding, if Jesus died for every sinner then every sinner would be saved. It is as simple as that. If Jesus died for you then you must be elect. There would be no truly independent condition, which must be met by the sinner. They assume that if Jesus died for you then you *must* become a believer. The thoughtful Calvinist knows that He cannot offer the death of Christ as a means of salvation for every sinner because (he assumes) that it is not intended to save every sinner.

This is where it is difficult to be a strict Calvinistic evangelist. **It is pretty awkward to go into the world and tell every sinner that Jesus might have died for their sins.** If you carefully read some Puritan writers, you will see that they did not offer the sacrifice of Christ to every sinner. They knew that it would be dishonest to promise salvation to anyone who was not elect, because Jesus did not die for them. Fortunately, many professing Calvinists ignore the implications of their doctrine and tell every sinner that Jesus died to save them, or that He died to make their salvation possible. This is especially true if the sinner is a dear friend, family member, or potential church member. It is a good kind of hypocrisy. They offer the atonement of Christ to everyone in an evangelistic setting but deny that the atonement is intended to save everyone in their creeds. Some might call it a "felicitous inconsistency." They get it right in practice but wrong on paper.

4.7 PARENTAL AND OTHER INFLUENCES

Both pastors believe that many factors and influences will come to bear on the child's life from the cradle to the grave. They will vary in scope from person to person. Like snowflakes and DNA, no two people will ever experience identical circumstances in their lives. Some influences will be of the Spirit of God that will urge the soul to receive the light and suppress the darkness. Likewise, some influences will be of the Devil or the spirit of Anti-Christ. These influences will urge the soul to suppress the truth and believe the lies. Due to Adam's fall, many of the influences of darkness will come from within our own

heart. Our sinful nature, the world, and the Devil are the sources of evil influences.

Also, the common working of God's Spirit comes to us in different ways. God's gracious influence comes to us through the light of nature, our conscience, God's Word in Scripture, and the Church of true believers. We know that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to convince the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. John 16:8 Some of these influences are common to every person who has ever lived. Some are not. Unto whom much is given, much will be required. The child born into an illiterate tribe of idol worshipping cannibals will not be responsible for knowing as much as the child born into an educated and loving Christian family.

The Calvinistic pastor maintains that these influences cannot alter God's previous choice of who will be forgiven. The outcome has already been decided by God. It simply cannot be altered. If the child is elect then God has planned to provide all that is necessary for his irresistible salvation. God will inevitably see to it, that all of the requirements for salvation will be met. In the March 27, 2009 daily study in Ligonier's Tabletalk magazine, we read the following:

As Paul tells us elsewhere, God always completes the good work that He begins in His people (Phil. 1:6), and He will do whatever it takes to ensure that we work out our salvation in fear and trembling, (2:12-13)³

This statement does a nice job of delicately presenting the Calvinistic position. It *gives the impression* that the chosen sinners will independently co-operate with God in their salvation . . . without actually saying it as such. Saying that God "will do whatever it takes" is more agreeable than saying that God will "irresistibly" ensure that the chosen sinners will work out their salvation with fear and trembling. It presents better by obscuring the blatant fatalism. It is better than saying, "The elect cannot possibly fail to work out their salvation with fear and trembling." It is much better than saying that God will "benevolently force" the chosen sinners to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. This kind of thoughtful *presentation* helps Calvinism to survive (and even flourish) because it sounds more like non-Calvinism. The average Christian reader would not likely object to the statement. The quote is acceptable to both Calvinist and non-Calvinist. There is enough

truth and enough ambiguity for both sides to let the statement go unchallenged. Again, we see how the double meaning is essential to Calvinism. Much like water is to life.

The Calvinistic pastor will still charge the new parents with their duty to raise the child in the faith and live as godly examples, but in the back of his mind, he knows that, even if they do, it is no guarantee that the child has been chosen for salvation. Again, Esau would be the pre-eminent example of this. Calvinists must acknowledge that if God did not have mercy on the firstborn son of the patriarch Isaac, who was the miracle child of Abraham, then there is no guarantee that the children of other true believers will be saved. (We will eventually spend a lot of time with poor old Esau in Chapter 9.)

The Calvinistic pastor may soberly remind the parents that, because of the child's sinful nature inherited from Adam, the child should be assumed to be at enmity with God. Even if he has been secretly chosen for salvation they can't know it until he demonstrates saving faith. Oddly enough, even in the Covenant brand of Calvinism, in which the children of believers are said to be in a place of grace, the newborn is still considered "spiritually dead." This view is obviously confusing. How could someone be spiritually dead, and yet at the same time, be in a state of grace?

Our Calvinistic pastor will probably avoid telling the parents that if they fail to teach the child the truth, and fail to live in a godly manner before him, then God will use other means to save him anyway . . . if he is elect. Likewise, he probably will not tell the new parents that even if they do teach the child the truth, and live as godly examples before him, that the child will perish, if he is not elect. This pastor would believe it but probably won't say it at the hospital. It would be bad form and poor timing. Some Reformed pastors will never say it. They are *reluctant Calvinists* and I think there are a lot of them. They assume that they must believe this way in order to protect salvation by grace from salvation by works. (I suppose there may be some Reformed pastors who never teach their views on predestination because they like their steady job and don't want to uproot their families and move.)

Our second pastor, the non-Calvinist, also believes that the same influences will come to bear on the child's life. This pastor does not believe that the destiny of the child's soul has already been irreversibly decided. He believes that God has made the necessary provision for

his salvation. The provision will be permanently applied to his life if he permanently embraces the gospel truth. The non-Calvinist pastor *does* not believe that the ability to repent and have faith will be *irresistibly* granted, imposed, compelled, infused, or enabled in adults. He believes that God's desire for our salvation can be resisted, as per the decree of God. God refuses to make us believe . . . even if He could.

This pastor will also charge the new parents and remind them that it is their duty to raise the child in the faith and live as godly examples. He would also acknowledge that their influence, alone, would not ultimately determine the child's eternal outcome. However, he is sure that the child will be more inclined to embrace the gospel if they teach him the faith and live it consistently before him. Likewise, the child will be more inclined to reject the gospel if they don't teach it and live it before him.

One should always think of this before . . . you know . . . having children. Being a parent is serious business.

4.8 THE FINAL JUDGMENT IS OF INDIVIDUALS

Both pastors also agree that no other person can savingly believe for the child. Family, friends, and church can (and should) affirm the truth, especially the good news of Jesus. They should explain it and live it. Christians should pray for lost sinners and urge them to believe the truth, but they cannot believe *for* anyone else. In the final judgment, salvation is between the individual sinner and God. Heb 9:27; 2 Cor 5:10

The Calvinist may agree that judgment comes after we die, but he essentially, has it taking place in the mind of God before the world was made. We will see that in the Calvinistic way, God has eternally judged every person *before* we are born. The final Judgment Day merely reveals the results of God's prehistoric decision. Again, we will find the Calvinist leaning heavily on his understanding of how God uses His foreknowledge.

The non-Calvinist says that God's final judgment will be based on that which individual sinners did with the light they were given throughout their entire lifetime. He believes that each person receives the necessary light to repent and believe the truth in addition to the corruption inherited from Adam. He maintains that our genetics, our parenting, our education, and every social interaction will all be factored

into our final judgment. God will take into account any exposure we had to the truth, including the gospel of Christ. God will then hand down the verdict when life is over. The just shall live by their faith . . . and the proud will perish.

In his thought provoking book, *have a little faith*, Mitch Albom quotes a street wise elder in a downtown Detroit church as saying,

But it's not me against the other guy. It's God measuring you against you . . .⁴

I think that quite aptly describes an important aspect of the biblical final judgment. We each will be held accountable for our transgressions of God's laws based on our personal exposure to them, and the grace, which we each have been given.

4.9 OMNISCIENCE, SOVEREIGNTY, AND THE FIRST RAINBOW

I apologize, but some discussion of God's omniscience is inevitable. Let's get it over with now. As you can imagine, this section could get us way off track but we won't let it happen. I really do understand if you want to skip this section . . . but don't. It's not that long.

I'll go ahead and admit one thing at the start: I'm no expert on God's omniscience. You're probably not surprised. You aren't either. I actually have always felt a little silly trying to take a firm view on anything to do with God's omniscience, His foreknowledge, and His operations outside of time. I also have a habit of poking fun at those who act like authorities on omniscience as if they know *everything* about it. (Some talk about "Lapsarian" opinions with amazing confidence.) Who wants to lecture, authoritatively, on the omniscience of the eternal God? Even Paul doesn't want to go there. In Romans 11, when he finishes discussing God's dealing with the Jews in the course of redemptive history, he exclaims,

Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?

It is safe to say that God's omniscience is "past finding out." We must all admit that when we venture outside of that which is clear in Scripture, including that which is between the lines of Scripture, we must be extremely careful to acknowledge it. We must be slow to speak with certainty. These waters are deep but the Bible does take us out over them. Therefore, we may dive down a little bit, ever so carefully.

Although we may want solid answers on all of life's questions, we should not be afraid to call a mystery . . . a mystery, simply because many liberals and other skeptics try to call every biblical teaching they don't like . . . a mystery. Some people don't *want* to be right about any timeless truths of bedrock certainty, even if God has revealed them. They prefer to think of foundational truth in terms of trampoline springs instead of solid rock. Fortunately, we do not need to get an "A" in "omniscience class" to know God, and to please Him by faith. If we understood everything, as God does, then we would not need to trust in the Lord with all of our heart. We could lean on our own understanding. Prov 3:5 We would not need any faith. Theologians and wannabe theologians should avoid trying to eliminate the need for faith, because God really values it. We should face the hard truth of God's severity with the same uncompromising conviction that we have for His love.

One of the indisputable attributes of God is patience, and that alone will give us trouble in understanding God's omniscience. Patience, by definition, requires time, but God can operate outside of time. It does seem that for God to actually be patient then time must actually pass. Our understanding of the longsuffering of God is perfunctory if you insist on a simplistic definition of His omniscience. Here you can begin to see why any human understanding of God's omniscience is apt to miss the mark. Our minds aren't geared to handle that kind of information.

Thankfully, the Bible does not hold us accountable for understanding how God works outside of time. The Bible teaches us to relate to Him within the limits of time and space. We would be wise to avoid any hard conclusions regarding concepts we can't grasp. Yet, we must do so without giving up our convictions that are grounded in the clear revelation of Scripture. We can probably agree that "all knowing" does not mean "all manipulating." God does not have to *directly* cause something to occur to know ahead of time that it will occur.

Thus a question: Does God's foreknowledge of an event logically necessitate that the event is *irresistibly* brought about? I say no. Others say yes. (I use the term "logically", as if God's omniscience must play by the same rules as our human understanding of logic. I'm in over my head already! Omniscience is not entirely logical to me.) Nevertheless, it seems that God's foreknowledge does not cause anything to occur; it only *foresees* that it will occur. As I see it, God could know the Dow Jones average 10 years from now without directly causing it. He can predict the winner of next year's Super Bowl without fixing the game. God's prior knowledge, in and of itself, would have no bearing on who wins the game. God could fix the outcome of the game, if He wants to, unless He has made a decree that would limit Him in that context. Both sides of our debate seem to agree on this much.

I have no doubt there are quite a few prayers offered each year asking God to determine who wins the Super Bowl. (Or, who covers the point spread.) Imagine the money that could be made if God were to share his foreknowledge with brokers and bookies. Talk about a hot tip. Those of us who have seen our retirement accounts get battered into pocket change, by an economic downturn, would be happy to pay for some infallible foreknowledge of the global markets.

In the same way, it seems that God *could* know ahead of time (if He wants to) who will exercise genuine saving faith in Christ, without irresistibly manipulating (or causing) their faith. God is sovereign therefore He is free to act on His foreknowledge or He can resist acting on His foreknowledge. The Bible does reveal to us that some sinners will not repent and hell will be occupied. Luke 10:15; 12:5; 16:23; Rev 21:8 But I would maintain that Scripture does not say that God did not desire for those souls to be saved, or that He made no viable saving provision for their salvation. It teaches the opposite. Those who perish will be condemned for a number of reasons. (Remember our previous discussion of concurrence in Chapter 3.) Simply because someone receives Christ, it does not necessarily mean that God irresistibly caused their faith. Likewise, if someone rejects the truth, it does not mean that God caused their heart to reject it any more than He manipulated Joseph's envious brothers and Job's enemies to do what they did. I don't think there are many Calvinists who would teach that God irresistibly causes anyone's evil thoughts or actions. (I'm not entirely sure about every Calvinist.)

We know also, that God is free to place restrictions on Himself if he wants to. He is limited by his character, and His own decrees and promises. God can't do anything that is sinful. He is holy and just; He always acts according to His impeccable nature.

Men and women, on the other hand, are double minded. We are duplicitous, both before we believe the gospel and after. Even believers do not possess a single perfect nature that always thinks and acts righteously. We do both good and evil as unbelievers and believers. Adam and Eve managed to sin *without* a sinful nature and the rest of mankind will manage to do some things right, even *with* a sinful nature. The mystery lies in how those two things can happen. Mt 7:11; Rom 2:14; Jam 1:8; 4:8

God is certainly sovereign. He is on the throne and He won't be getting off. A very important point in our debate is that God's sovereignty does not prohibit Him from delegating authority, responsibility, *and ability* to sinful creatures. No person or angel can impose their will on God but He can limit His own righteous options, if He wants to. If God wanted to delegate the ability to believe the gospel to those who are dead in trespasses and sins then He certainly has the right. If He wanted to give natural born sinners the grace needed to repent then He certainly could. His sovereignty would not prohibit this kind of decree, nor would His righteousness. Calvinists often confuse God's right to delegate a limited authority with utterly abdicating His throne.

A great example of all this is in the promise of the rainbow recorded in Genesis 9. You will remember, after the flood, God promised that He would never do that again. He said that He would not destroy all flesh with a flood. Nobody pressured God into the decision. Nobody could. His character did not inhibit Him from flooding the earth again. The rainbow is said to be a sign of the covenant promise between Himself and every living creature. God's hands are tied . . . by God Himself. Now surely He has plenty of options at His disposal if He wanted to destroy the earth and all life, but a flood is no longer one of them. This is because of His promise. God is not a liar. He is trustworthy.

Every promise of God is a self-imposed restriction on His sovereignty, and God has made many promises to sinners. Some of them are conditional on our actions and some are not. But watch out, they are not all happy promises of blessing and mercy. Some of

God's promises are threats of judgment and punishment. He keeps them all just the same. We may fail to keep our word but God will keep His. 2 Tim 2:13

We can see, in God's refusal to prevent the falls of Adam and Satan, that He clearly restrains His omnipotent power. He could have prevented evil's entrance into His creation but He chose not to. When God gave Adam the freedom and ability to choose sin, He simultaneously restricted His own freedom to cause the outcome . . . irresistibly. Therefore, He is just to hold Adam accountable. Both sides of our debate would likely agree on this point . . . I think.

If God irresistibly causes the outcome of an event then He will be responsible for any moral implications of that event. If God directly caused Adam's fall then God is the author (or direct source) of sin, and we don't need to go there. We know that God is holy. The holiness of God is explicit in Scripture. God's holiness is an invisible attribute that is apparent to every soul. Rom 1:20 Therefore, it stands to reason that He does not impose His "desired" will in every detail of our lives. Sometimes, there is a difference between God's desire and His decree. Perhaps God can sovereignly limit His omniscience. I surely don't know how, but at the same time, I would hesitate to think that the Lord is somehow a slave to His own omniscience.

Here we must guard against extremes. There may be a better option in understanding God's omniscience than a full-blown "divine Fatalism" or a full-blown "Open Theism". Foreknowledge notwithstanding, it appears that God will be keeping His sovereign options as open as He wishes. It is hard, if not impossible, for us to understand how the Lord could withhold knowledge from Himself, but there are numerous places in Scripture where He appears to be doing just that. There are places in the Bible where God appears to be un-involved, to be ignorant of something, to learn something, or to be deciding something in a moment of time. There must be a reason that He presents Himself to us in this way. It is a remarkable thing. We should look at some familiar examples.

One of the most famous examples is seen in the angel's response (on behalf of God) to Abraham, at Moriah, when he was about to drop the knife on Isaac. The angel said,

Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me! Gen. 22:11

The words “now I know” are staggering to our typical understanding of God’s knowledge. They appear to show that God did not know for sure what Abraham would do. We see that a ram was conveniently caught in the thicket near Abraham and Isaac. This surely suggests that God knew Abraham *might* actually carry out his extraordinary instructions. It was not God’s *desired* will for Abraham to kill Isaac, but He did tell Abraham to offer him up. At first glance, this type of thing tends to shake our confidence in God’s holiness and trustworthiness, but it will actually serve to strengthen it in the long run. Faith begets more faith.

Another example in Scripture where God, at least, appears to be less than omniscient is in Genesis 2:19. It occurs before the fall. At the very beginning of the biblical record, we see how God will have us understand His omniscience.

Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name.

It seems that God was waiting to see what Adam would name the animals. It does not absolutely assert that God did not already know what the names would be, but it certainly gives that impression. There must be a reason why scripture uses this kind of language early and often in the Bible.

Another example of God’s appearing to be ignorant of something also occurred early in the “meta-narrative” that we call Scripture. It is the episode of Abraham and Sodom. We read that God Himself said,

. . . because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not I will know. Gen 18:20-21

. . . If not I will know??

This is a puzzling passage indeed, but at face value, I am glad that God does not just take somebody's word for it that things are going badly in my life, church, or community. Angels can be unreliable, sometimes corrupt, and I would hate for God to rain judgment on me based on some bad angelic intelligence reports. I'm glad to know that before God really brings it . . . He checks for Himself. (It is just a little surprising that He would need to.) Again, He seems to desire that we not worry about fully grasping the scope and use of His omniscience.

Now I realize we have to be careful here, but if our typical understanding of foreknowledge is correct, then this is all very odd. In addition, in verses 17-18, God appears to be deciding in that moment of time whether to tell Abraham what He is planning regarding Sodom. It shows that He already knows what is, (or might be) about to go down there, (which was fire and brimstone.)

Please note the language that is used here in Genesis. We are not led to believe that God *could not* know what was happening in Sodom. It is presented in a way that suggests God could have known about the trouble in Sodom . . . but chose not to. This makes more sense. It is as if the "Father" went into another room, where He did not have to hear, or see, the chaos in the kid's playroom. If you are a parent then you can relate to this. Sometimes we put the kids in the playroom or out in the back yard. We make sure they can't hurt themselves too badly and shut the door. We may check on them occasionally when it gets too loud or too quiet, but we sovereignly choose to let them play without our direct supervision and control. Responsible parents will put down the phone, the book, the computer, or the TV remote control and check on their kids. Whenever God is presented as ignorant of the thoughts or affairs of men it, perhaps, it may be understood as a "deliberate ignorance."

However, we must keep our balance in all of this. The Bible is full of prophecies, texts, and instances, which show that God can predict and/or determine the future. This does not logically necessitate that He must always act on His foreknowledge. Perhaps, it is possible that His foreknowledge is not as expansive as we might hypothetically think it must be. God knows the end from the beginning but His omniscience is not exhaustively defined in the Bible. This does not necessarily mean that God is not in complete control of His creation. As sovereign, He can choose to be very involved, slightly involved, or quite un-involved

in the specific affairs of men. **By definition, God's sovereignty does not require Him to do anything, let alone manipulate everything, which may have eternal consequences.** Theoretically, God could be sovereign and merely wind up the earth, like a kids toy, and leave it completely alone. We can all be very glad that He has not done that.

These are not the only places in Scripture where God appears to be ignorant of something. Noteworthy also, are Christ's parables that represent God as a master, landowner, or bridegroom who *goes away* for a while, leaving His subordinates to make decisions without His direct supervision or knowledge. They are too common to simply dismiss from the discussion. God must want us to think of Him in this way or these would not be in the Bible. We are all being genuinely tested in God's big classroom of life. Sometimes the Teacher leaves the room. God could manipulate every detail . . . but He sovereignly refuses.

I know what some of you are thinking. Any view of God's omniscience which suggests that God did not actually know what Adam would name the animals, or if Abraham would actually sacrifice Isaac, or how bad things had gotten in Sodom is headed down the slippery slope to an Open Theism that portrays the LORD as some kind of ignorant goof up of a deity. I don't think those are our only two choices, but a thorough discussion of all this would take us well beyond the scope of this writing.

I don't think God wants us to be paralyzed by speculation over His omniscience, and nullify the potentially eternal importance of our day-to-day decisions. The same is true of His omnipotence. **We should be comforted to know that God is not flying, as it were, by the seat of His pants, willy-nilly, without any plan or ability to affect the world. Yet at the same time, He has not irresistibly manipulated every event and crucial decision of our lives. God will receive more honor by giving us the keys and letting us drive, than if He always took the wheel Himself.** Indeed, if we can know God by experience, it is far better than just knowing Him in theory. That is why we are here.

We probably all agree that God's clear revelation must trump our paltry understanding of His omniscience. That which is clearly explained in Scripture should take precedence over that which might be implied in Scripture. When two doctrines seem to be in conflict we

do well to stay close to the language of Scripture, shut up, and do as we are told.

God obviously values our faith. Any discussion of God's eternal knowledge is a good place to have some. We don't need the Bible to know that. This is one situation where we need to remember what God said to Job, when He finally answered his complaints. God did not bother to explain why He permitted Job to suffer all that misery. He bluntly and eloquently instructed Job to consider a short list of some of the things, which He has created. God instructed Job to ponder, for a minute, just how wise He must be to put together such a marvelous creation. As you recall, Job got the message and decided to quit with all the questions. There is plenty of rational and empirical proof for us to be certain that God knows what He is doing. **By considering the creation, Job understood that God is trustworthy. No one needs a Bible to know that the Creator of the heavens and the earth should be trusted.**

We go through all of this to remind both sides of the debate over grace that if your position on election (or any biblical doctrine) is primarily dependant on your understanding of God's omniscience, then you are on some thin ice. You may as well base your doctrines on your understanding of God's self-existence. Let's get all we can from Scripture and be wary of things that are deliberately out of reach.

Again and finally, we should not put too much stock in our understanding of God's omniscience if we want to appreciate God's patience. It takes time to be patient even if you are God. Omniscience works outside of time but patience is defined by time. If God predetermines who will be given the ability to believe then He must also predetermine when that ability will be given and thus when the elect would believe. If the decision to bestow faith on someone was made before that soul was born, then it is absurd to think that God exercised any real patience with that sinner. That person's faith will be delivered right on schedule, whenever God chooses to deliver it. It could not be any other way. A simplistic understanding of God's omniscience renders His patience perfunctory. **The Bible magnifies the actual patience and longsuffering of God more than it attempts to define the scope of His omniscience.**

OK, enough of that stuff, let's get back to the main question.

5.0 Predestination is Like the Super Bowl.

All Christians probably have some loosely held view of predestination, or at least they should. If you believe in Bible prophecy then you believe that God has foreknowledge. We also must acknowledge that God can influence the events of human history, directly and indirectly. God may influence the course of history or withhold His influence as He sees fit. We all ought to believe that men do not rule over God. Remember, faith is one of God's ultimate objectives for us in this life. In addition to being the means through which we are saved, our faith honors God. 1 Peter 1:9 God wants us to view Him as trustworthy. It is not an unreasonable expectation. He has given us plenty of reason to trust His wisdom, power, holiness, and love.

Scripture teaches, explicitly, that God's plan of redemption was conceived before the foundation of the world. Immediately after the fall, we read the somewhat cryptic prediction of the seed of the woman crushing the head of the seed of the serpent. Gen 3:15 God was not surprised by the fall of man. In addition, Paul speaks of Christians as being chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. Eph 1:4 Therefore, he must have foreseen the introduction of sin. Scripture reveals that God knew what He was doing by ordaining the fall of man. It is evident that God "wanted" (or ordained) every child of Adam to be born in sin. Nobody is perfect . . . except Jesus and He had a different Father. We will have none of this dribble that God did not know what He was doing by permitting sin's entrance into His creation, or that He was helpless to prevent it. The God who is described in the Bible and described in the "book of this world" is not that small.

The word translated as "predestined" is used 6 times in the New Testament, each in some context of God's plan of salvation. Again, even if you don't believe that the Bible is entirely God breathed, you must acknowledge that it was God, who made everything from water to the constellations. It is just not reasonable to think that He did not know what He was doing with His creation. Clearly, some aspects of God's plan of salvation were predestined . . . even irresistibly. Our debate is over *which* aspects of the plan are irresistibly predetermined and which aspects may not be.

It would be gross self aggrandizement to think that we can know, with any degree of certainty, the specifics and the order of God's prehistoric thoughts, unless they are clearly revealed. Scripture is pretty silent on such things. "Just trust me, and do as I say" is the paraphrased answer we get from God regarding the specifics of His thoughts before creation. This will sound a lot like what our parents said when we were too young to understand the reasons behind all the rules of the home. No surprise here, He is our Heavenly Father. Our human understanding of the mysteries of God's omniscience is juvenile at best.

Also, Adam, Eve, and the rest of us don't get to sit down at the negotiating table and hammer out a deal for our salvation. Guilty sinners don't have much negotiating leverage with a holy God. That would be like giving a convicted felon the opportunity to set the terms of his debt to society. This is one context, in which we should all agree that salvation is not decided by the "will of man." John 1:12-13 The plan of salvation was not drawn up or ratified by men. We weren't even consulted. We didn't get a vote. The Kingdom of God is a monarchy and that is a good thing. God did not take a survey to see what sinful men thought He should do with them. Nobody was around when God foresaw the whole mess coming.

You will remember we noted the Westminster Confession, and the commentator on it, as saying:

#3 By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.¹

That God is *the* one who determines who shall, and who shall not be saved, is one of the clearest teachings in Scripture.²

All Christians should be able to give each one of these statements a hearty and Bible thumping "Amen." (Well, Presbyterians and Lutherans may just nod quietly, but the rest of us say "Amen.") I'm serious. Read them again if you need to. There is nothing in those two statements, which says anything about salvation being individual, unconditional, irresistible, or otherwise. By those statements alone, one could suppose that God will determine our salvation by individual height and weight,

SAT scores, good deeds, golf handicap, or maybe even the mood God will be in when we show up for judgment.

These statements don't even say that we are judged individually. Based on these statements alone, God could save (or damn) us based on our nationality, family bloodline, church membership, or political party. They are general statements of God's sovereignty and pre-determination that some men would be saved, and some would not. By themselves, they say very little of the specific terms and conditions of salvation. Neither do they state *which* individuals will enjoy everlasting life and which will endure everlasting death. Even the second comment, which said that God determines who is saved, does not rule out the possibility that *God may have decreed* that men will play an independent role in their own salvation or damnation. It simply avers that God ultimately decides who is saved and who is lost. It makes no mention of how. Let's be careful not to start arguing until we must.

Again, one of the difficulties we have in discussing biblical predestination is that most all orthodox Protestants agree that *some aspects* of salvation are unchangeably predetermined. They just don't agree on *which aspects* are irreversibly decreed. Also, there are people on both sides of our debate who teach that salvation is indeed irresistible for infants and small children who die in childhood.

5.1 WESTMINSTER CHAPTER 3, SECTION 6

The Westminster Confession Chapter 3 Section #6 says,

As God has appointed the elect unto glory, so has he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ; are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved but the elect only.³

Here in section 6, we find some wording that really distinguishes the Calvinistic view of predestination. We see the phrase, “effectually called unto faith in Christ by His Spirit working in due season.” This

phrase essentially says that God decided and predetermined before the foundation of the world *which* fallen sinners will have faith. This is a distinct principle of Calvinism. It is also an inference. The Bible does not state this explicitly.

Evangelical Protestants have historically agreed that God has previously decided that some fallen sinners will be saved and some will be lost . . . in a general sense. Evangelical Protestants also agree that God has decided *which* fallen sinners will be saved and which will be lost . . . in a general sense. *Believers* will be saved and *unbelievers* will be lost. This is an immutable eternal decree. It can't be changed. Calvinism takes this a big step further and teaches that God alone has irreversibly decided which individual sinners will be believers, and therefore which sinners will be left with no ability to believe. This "Unconditional Election" drives the car in the Calvinistic system. All the other doctrines of salvation are strapped in the back seat. They only go where election takes them.

(Note: Both sides of our debate hold the view that Adam's fall leaves all men in need of the gospel. They both even agree that fallen man is incapable of believing the gospel without divine help.)

This section of the Confession makes it impossible to be a Calvinist and claim that God really desires every sinner to be saved. Some have complained that the Confession is not "Calvinistic enough." Nevertheless, I can't see how anyone could agree that there are some people who God *desires* to be saved, and yet, at the same time, maintain that He refuses to "effectually" call them unto faith and redeem them. It is unreasonable to assume that God actually wants to save someone who He will not effectually call unto faith in Christ, justify, adopt, sanctify, and save. Westminster Section 6 is a clear declaration that God absolutely *does not* desire every sinner to be saved. In their system, if you were chosen for salvation then you were never in any real peril of being damned. Likewise, if you were not chosen for salvation then you were never close to being saved. **Any attempt, by a true Calvinist, to pretend that God actually desires every sinner to be saved is deceptive window dressing.**

5.2 SUPER BOWL PREDESTINATION

Properly understanding biblical predestination is somewhat like understanding the Super Bowl. I know that doesn't sound very theological, but as I have said, this writing is for laymen. There are plenty of heavyweight theological works on this debate available to you, if you prefer them. If you don't want to relate the terms and conditions of your eternal salvation to an overblown football game, I understand. But give it a chance, it's the best I can do so far. (Don't worry if you are not into American football. You don't need to know anything about the game to understand the illustration.)

The highest form of American football is played in the National Football League (The NFL). The NFL is sovereign over the affairs of the league. They predetermine which cities get to have a team, the schedules and locations of every game, and the rules for the game. They predetermine the number of players each team can have and how much money each team can spend on player salaries. They are very much in control of the league. Each year they put on a big game which will decide who wins the NFL championship. It is, of course, the Super Bowl.

The NFL predetermines in which city and stadium the Super Bowl will be played. They sovereignly establish the date for the game, what time the game will kickoff, the rules of the game, the referees for the game, and the scheduled length of the game. (It's a long one of course, to allow for all the pre-game hoopla and plenty of commercials that help pay for the game). The players and coaches don't decide these terms. The League does.

Here is the pertinent question: Does the NFL irresistibly predestine which two teams will play in the Super Bowl? Be careful . . . think it through.

The answer is yes they do . . . and no, they don't. It depends on how you mean it. It depends upon the specific context. The NFL is divided into two conferences. According to the sovereign rules of the NFL, the only two teams that get to play in the Super Bowl are the National Conference champion (NFC) and the American Conference champion. (AFC) It is immutably established by the League. Your favorite team does not get to play unless they won their conference championship. They can't buy their way into the game. They can't sneak into the

game. They can't have their own Super Bowl. They failed to meet the condition of winning their conference, therefore . . . no Super Bowl. No "big dance." No "Media Day." No bonus paychecks. (At least in this event there is some hope for next year.) Thus, the answer, in a general context, is yes, the NFL irresistibly predestines which two teams will play in the Super Bowl. It must be the two conference champs. It is inevitable. It can't be altered.

Now if you immediately said no, then you were also right . . . but in a different context. The NFL does not decide which two teams will win their respective conference championship. That is decided on the field, by the teams, in the regular season and playoff games. The league does not fix the outcome of the games leading up to the Super Bowl. (We hope.) The teams slug it out on the field until the conference champions are determined. So the answer, in a more particular context, is no, the NFL does not irresistibly predestine which two teams will play in the Super Bowl. The teams decide that by playing the games.

If you were to take the Calvinistic view of the Super Bowl, then you would believe that God fixes the outcome of the regular season and playoff games to assure that His chosen teams qualify for the Super Bowl. He would "graciously enable" the predestined teams to play better, and/or make sure they get enough of the "lucky" breaks and close calls to assure that they win.

Perhaps you can already see the parallel with God's predestination in salvation. The same type question is posed: "Does God irresistibly predestine which fallen sinners will be saved and which be lost?"

The answer is yes He does . . . and no, He doesn't. It depends on the context. God is sovereign over the terms and conditions of our forgiveness. As stated before, men don't decide the terms and conditions of salvation. God alone does, with no input from us. If it were up to us to decide then we would have all kinds of crazy notions of how we might be saved. Tall people might say whoever is over 6'2" shall be saved. Some might suggest that whosoever shall forgive himself shall be saved. Some professing Christians actually do seem to believe, that if you don't drink alcohol, smoke, gamble or dance then you will be saved. Perhaps, the most popular teaching is whoever *dies* shall be saved. (That's the "seeker friendly" version). You get the idea. We don't set the terms and conditions of salvation from sin. God does, and this is as it should be. It is His law that we have broken.

As you surely know, God has indeed established the terms and conditions for sinners to be saved. Again, in brief summary, the terms are: Sinners must be justly forgiven of their sin. They must be born again. They must be redeemed and declared righteous through repentance and belief in the truth. The truth is now most fully revealed in the gospel of Christ. He is the Truth. John 14:6

Therefore, the answer to the question, in one context, is yes, God irresistibly predestines which fallen sinners will be saved and which will be lost *in a general sense*. Whoever believes will be saved. Whoever does not believe will not be saved. This can't be altered. It is irresistibly predestined. You must humbly believe the truth, be born again of the Spirit, and be redeemed by Christ. Only those sinners get to go to the big game in heaven. God alone has the right to establish these terms and conditions of salvation. He did so, before the foundation of the world. Anyone who tries to set up other terms is foolish and in serious danger.

Now if you immediately said no, God does not irresistibly predestine which fallen sinners will be saved and which will be lost, then you are also correct, *but in a different context*. Two of the above-mentioned conditions of salvation are conditions that must be met by God. We cannot make ourselves born again and we cannot redeem ourselves or declare ourselves righteous. The third condition, of course, is that sinners must repent and believe the truth. That is a human condition and it must be met, voluntarily, by the guilty sinner.

God does not predetermine irresistibly which individual sinners will actually repent and believe the truth. That is decided on the playing field of life, using our God given ability. God does predestine what *kind* of sinners will be forgiven. The sinners who will be forgiven are those penitent believers who trust in His mercy. This can't be altered. God does not predestine which sinners will be penitent and trust in His mercy. That responsibility has been sovereignly delegated to every sinner. The sinners who do not repent and believe the truth will perish. They were *appointed* to wrath because God has eternally refused to forgive the impenitent. 1 Thes 5:9 Those particular individuals were given the ability to believe, but they refused to use that God given ability. **Unbelievers are predestined to condemnation but no one is irresistibly predestined to be an unbeliever.**

If you hold this view then you are not a Calvinist, and this is where we must focus. It is often said that the Devil is in the details . . . but so is the Holy Spirit.

Now a Calvinist would be champing at the bit to declare that a fallen sinner, who is dead in trespasses and sins, does not have any God given ability to repent and believe . . . unless he is elect and already born again. The Calvinist insists that God's common grace does not enable repentance and faith in every sinner of sound mind.

So we'll press on. We have put our finger on the heart of the debate. It is the heart of fallen sinners. Every sound Protestant pastor believes that the just shall live by their faith, but not everyone agrees on *how* a fallen sinner comes to saving faith. Let's start examining some of the Scripture and see if we can prove the Super Bowl interpretation or the Calvinistic view of irresistible salvation.

5.3 TEXTS ON PREDESTINATION AND THE SPIRIT OF STUPOR

According to my old concordance, the Greek word translated "predestined" or "determined before" sounds like [pro or id zo]. We will look now at the texts, which are pertinent to our debate. We should note precisely *what* is being predestined. We should also ask whether it is being predestined in an absolutely inevitable sense. The word [pro or id zo] is in []:

Acts 4:27-28

For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose [determined before] to be done . . .

Here the word [pro or id zo] is translated as "determined before." It was said in a prayer of Peter and John after they were released by the Jewish authorities. Here we should briefly revisit the concept of concurrence that we previously saw with Job and Joseph. The Apostles' prayer shows that Herod and Pilate, Jews and Gentiles, all ganged up on Jesus to kill him. This was a bad thing. It was also exactly, what God had planned . . . for a very long time and for a very good reason.

Again, there is no need to assume that God *directly manipulated* anybody's mind to choose a bad thing; neither side of our debate would teach that God does that. God used His knowledge of their wickedness and their ignorance to get Jesus to the cross, where global redemption could be accomplished. It is plausible to assume that God knew that if he withheld His grace then their wickedness and ignorance would be unleashed, resulting in the crucifixion of Christ. Both sides of our debate will agree that God predetermined the death of Christ and the role that He would play in salvation.

We might simply assume that this was *irresistibly predestined* if it weren't for the things which Jesus said about His own death. Jesus said that He could have prayed to the Father for 12 legions of angels to deliver Him from the cross. He seemed confident that the Father would deliver Him from the cross . . . if asked. He does not seem to be merely claiming that God *could* deliver Him. He seems to be saying that God would . . . if He asked. We also know that there is a sense in which Jesus did not want to go through with the plan. His sweat became as drops of blood as He began to feel the hellish horror of being forsaken by His Father. Luke 22:44 Jesus also said that no man would take His life but He was laying it down of Himself. John 10:17-19 He was adamant that His sacrifice was voluntary, and yet at the same time, necessary to fulfill the Scripture. Mk 14:49; Luke 24:45 Paul also makes the point, in Philippians 2, that Jesus was not forced to relinquish His equality with God and become a man. Paul said that Jesus "emptied Himself" of His divine privileges. We must be careful not to oversimplify the choices of the human heart. We must also be careful not to oversimplify the choices of the divine heart.

If the execution of Christ was *irresistibly wrought* (or caused) by God, then the Romans and the Jews would be off the hook. They would not be accountable for killing an innocent man, who happened to be the Son of God. They could show up at judgment and defend their decision to kill Jesus as a good thing since God wanted it to take place, and they had no "power of contrary" choice in the decision. However, we know from Jesus' words to Pilate that both Jews and Romans would bear some blame for His unjust execution. John 19:11 We also know that Peter placed blame on his fellow Jews in Acts 2:23. We see the same thing confirmed by Stephen in Acts 7:52. As we observed in the fall of man, we can see that there will be plenty of

blame to go around in the death of Jesus. There is also a very real sense in which everyone who commits sin is “responsible” for the death of Jesus, and that would be *everyone*.

Let’s go ahead, at this point, and begin tackling a sticky problem that presents a dilemma for both sides of our debate. In John 12 and Romans 11, we read that God sent a “spirit of stupor” on the Jews and blinded their eyes so that they would not receive Jesus as their King, even though He was their King. This could be the pre-eminent place in the New Testament, where it might appear that God could be held responsible for someone’s sin, so we should slow down and look at it. On rare occasions, Scripture is worded in such a way that it appears as if God would actually be *causing* someone to make a wrong moral choice. Later, we will see this same kind of language when we start talking about how God hardened some people’s hearts.

We also see the same principle at work when Jesus explained why He spoke in parables. He explained that His reason for speaking in parables was so that the Jews would “see” and “hear” but not understand. Mt 13 God was deliberately keeping the hidden truths of the kingdom a mystery. This is not so hard to understand. If everyone fully realized who Jesus was then He would not have been crucified. They would have worshipped Him and wanted Him to set up His kingdom immediately but that was not God’s plan. If Jesus did not finish His work on the cross then the world would not have a Savior . . . and we definitely need a Savior. This also explains why Jesus was so sharp with Peter when he tried to prevent Him from going to Jerusalem and being killed. You may remember that Jesus turned to Peter and referred to him as Satan. He said that Peter was an offense to Him and that he was carnally minded. (Let’s give Peter some credit here. I don’t think I would have handled it very well if Jesus had called me Satan.) Mt 16:23

This is another crucial example of why we must not let that, which is clear in Scripture take a back seat to that which may be implied in Scripture. Sometimes Scripture takes us to the edge of some very deep mysteries. Sometimes, serious heresy is but a careless word away. The merging of God’s sovereign control of all things and man’s responsibility is such a place of mystery and intrigue. Sometimes it is hard for us to tell where God’s irresistible control leaves off and man’s responsibility picks up. It is clear that the God of the Bible is very holy. He does not sin and He does not tempt anyone to sin. The list of

biblical texts that support the utter holiness of God is long. It is long and clear. It is explicit.

An important distinction must be made between God directly causing someone to sin, and God's withholding the grace that is needed to prevent someone from sinning on their own. We also know from Scripture that this blinding of the Jews was "partial" or "in part." Paul said that when a Jew "turns to the Lord" the veil is taken away. This shows that the blinding did not utterly prevent repentance. Rom 11:25; 2 Cor 3:16 Not every Jew rejected Jesus as the Christ. We know the disciples were all Jewish and they managed to believe in spite of the "spirit of stupor." They weren't much help to Jesus in His hour of need but they did not totally reject Him. It seems that this "blinding" had effected even the disciples but it did not altogether prevent them from faith in Christ. Also, many Jews who initially rejected Jesus later received Him. These would include James the Lord's brother. Luke 7:30; Acts 15:5; John 7:5; Gal 1:19

By sending the spirit of stupor, God was not utterly preventing anyone from being saved. He was assuring that there was not a wholesale reception of Jesus at that time. If enough of the Jews had received Jesus as their King then He would not have been sacrificed for the sins of the world. The coronation will come later.

This also helps to explain how Jesus could be rejected by the nation that was the most prepared to recognize Him as their Messiah, and the only begotten Son of God. It is sometimes hard to believe that more Jews did not follow Christ when you consider the truckload of Scriptural evidence that substantiated His claims. Now, we know that God was deliberately postponing any wholesale faith until the Lamb was slain. We do not need to assume that anyone went to hell because of this blinding. It stands to reason that this blinding will be a factor in God's perfect judgment of them. God is more patient with sins of ignorance than He is with sinning against great light. Jesus' harshest words were for those who knew exactly who He was but rejected Him anyway. John 7:28; Luke 20:14

Perhaps, it is possible that God was doing some people a big favor by blinding them. This partial blindness may have actually served to protect them from the irreparable guilt of rejecting their Messiah. Jesus' intercessory prayer from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" was based upon their ignorance. Luke

23:34 It seems that if God had not sent the “spirit of stupor” then they would have been all the more culpable.

Here is an important point. Please don’t miss it. This blinding of the Jews may appear to give credence to the Calvinistic doctrine that some people are not chosen to be believers, but instead it actually serves to show that unbelievers possess the ability to believe in Jesus. If they had no natural ability to believe then they would not need such a blinding in order to send Jesus to the cross.

God’s great plan of salvation was predestined from before time, but the text in Acts 4 does not prove that any individuals were irresistibly pre-selected to be believers.

Our next text with the word [pro or id zo] is Romans 8:28-30:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God and are the called according to *His* purpose. For whom He foreknew, (He) also [predestined] to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He [predestined], these He also called, whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

This section of Romans is often called the Golden Chain. It lists some of the aspects of the plan of salvation, which *God* accomplishes. Paul is listing some of the terms and conditions of the deal, if you will. These are conditions which God *Himself* must accomplish if anyone is to be saved. It is not an exhaustive list, as regeneration and adoption are not mentioned here. You will note, also, that repentance and persevering faith is not listed. Penitent faith is the *human* condition of the plan of salvation. It is the aspect of salvation, in which each sinner plays a role. It must be acknowledged that all of our faith and repentance is futile if God is not willing to supply that which only He can, in order to bring about our salvation. It is senseless to suppose that we could stand upon His promises of salvation if He never makes any. It would do us no good to believe God’s word if the Word did not become flesh and die for our sins.

Romans 8:28-30 is not a specific statement of which individuals will receive the ability to have faith. The predestination in this text is of those whom God foreknew to be conformed to the image of

His Son, which is a designed purpose of salvation. The goal, or final destination of our pilgrimage, is our transformation into the image of Christ. Nothing is said here, in Romans 8, of the predestination *unto faith in Christ* that we saw in the Westminster Confession. We must be found to be as perfect as Christ is, or we will not enjoy God's eternal presence. No reason is given here for any specific individual's faith. This is a listing of God's gracious provision for our salvation. These are conditions, which God must meet, or no one will be saved.

Paul does not explain the specific nature of this foreknowledge. He simply says that those who were foreknown by God will be conformed to the image of His Son. Thus, they will be considered as the first of many "brothers" of Jesus. Believers are adopted into God's family and Jesus is our "big Brother." He was not adopted. This text does not answer our question of how someone gets to be a believer. Paul already covered justification by faith in Romans 4. The necessary condition of faith is not mentioned in this list.

Again, Calvinists understand the predestination mentioned here to be the unconditional and irresistible election of particular sinners *unto faith*. In their view, this is not a general predestination of "whoever believes" but it is a *particular* predestination, of which specific sinners will be enabled to believe. This would certainly be gracious. No one could argue that point. Nevertheless, it is fatalistic, since men would play no truly independent role, which would be essential to their salvation. If you hold to this view, then you should not pretend that salvation has a meaningful human condition. You must deny that salvation has any independent condition, which must be met by the elect sinner.

The non-Calvinist sees this text as a predestination of "whoever believes" to receive the listed spiritual blessings. Remember, Paul is writing to believers. He is writing to the "saints" at the Church in Rome. God has sovereignly predestined that only these, would be the sinners He justifies, conforms to the image of His Son, and ultimately glorifies. No individuals are named in these verses. Repentance with faith is *not* listed here because it is an aspect of God's plan in which the sinner must contribute. Only believers will be conformed into the image of Christ. God sees true believers as "in Christ" and Christ is utterly without sin. Believers do not actually live without sin in this earthly life. 1 John 1:8; Heb 12:1; James 1:21;

Our earthly sanctification is not part of this list because Christ-like perfection, in this earthly life, is not required for salvation. Our practical sanctification is something we must do by the grace of God in order to please Him, enjoy life, and be sure of our salvation. Our earthly sanctification is simply repentance being carried out day after day. This understanding, in which the common grace of God enables repentance and faith, is exceedingly gracious on God's part, but it is not fatalistic. This is because the saved will play a truly volitional role in their destinies. But that role is not keeping the law to avoid the need of salvation, nor is it keeping the law to atone for sin. It is of faith that it might be of grace. Rom 4:16

Grace does not need to be irresistible to be amazing.

The next two texts are often in the middle of the fray over predestination.

Eph. 1:4-5

. . . just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having [predestined] us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will . . .

Eph 1:11-13

In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being [predestined] according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation . . .

The first text is used extensively by Calvinists, especially when they get tempted to pretend that there should be a period after “chosen in Him before the foundation of the world” in verse 4. The translators did not put a period there but even if they did, it would not necessarily teach that certain individuals were *predestined to be believers*. It can easily mean that believers, in general, were chosen “in Him before the foundation

of the world” to be holy and without blame, without straining the context.

One thing is certain: whatever is being predestined was done so before the foundation of the world. The primary question here is: What is actually being predetermined? We know that Paul is addressing the “saints” (or holy ones) and “faithful” in Ephesus. In verse 5, virtually all English translations read in such a way as to show that believers are adopted as sons, by Jesus Christ. It does not say that they were predestined unto belief as the Westminster confession claims.

This chapter of Ephesians is a wonderful listing of the many spiritual blessings, reserved for believers, in the heavenly places in Christ. As we saw in Romans 8, salvation is *God's* plan. It was devised in the mind of God before the foundation of the world. This is explicit in Scripture. These texts, however, do not answer the question of whether *certain individuals* were pre-selected to “trust” in Christ. It shows the predetermined blessedness of those who do. Paul lists more of the specific aspects of the plan. We could now add the terms adoption, redemption, inheritance, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit to the “Golden Chain” of Romans 8. Believers do not perform these aspects of the plan. They are *done to* those who believe. We do not contribute to them. God sovereignly administers them to those who believe. There is nothing in these texts, which explicitly explains that the ability to trust the truth is only given to some sinners.

Again, those who trust in Christ are predestined to enjoy all these benefits, but this does not say that those who trust in Christ were irresistibly predestined unto faith. We do see, from verse 12, that the elect are those who believe in Christ, but this chapter says nothing specifically of *how* they became capable of faith. Paul simply says they “heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.” Eph 1:13 The Calvinist teaches that they heard because God irresistibly gave them ears to hear, but that is not stated here in Ephesians. It is an inference. Unbelievers can hear the truth but that does not guarantee a positive response of trust.

Let's look at one more text, which would seem to support the Calvinistic view of predestination and unconditional election. If I were still a Calvinist I might be counting on this text above all others to make my case. The text is Acts 13:48. Paul and Barnabas were in

Antioch, where the Jews were resisting the gospel, but the Gentiles were “begging” for more of it. Luke writes:

Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

The word [tasso] which is translated “appointed” in this verse is also translated as “ordained” in other major English translations. (As is often the case with difficult texts, there is some dispute among scholars over the best way to translate this.) It does not exclusively, or necessarily, carry with it the idea of an immutable eternal decree . . . but it could. It is usually used in the context of something that was planned beforehand, but not necessarily in an irresistible sense. We might agree that God ordained the fall of Adam but that does not mean that Adam was irresistibly forced to sin. God can ordain things to occur that He does not directly cause to occur. We should not assume that these Gentiles were welcoming the gospel because they were irresistibly compelled to do so. There is nothing in the word [tasso] that requires us to believe that these Gentiles could not refuse the gospel.

A better way to understand the term [tasso] would be in the sense of 1 Peter 1:2. These hungry Gentiles were “elect according the foreknowledge of God.” This text speaks to God’s omniscience. It is reasonable to think that God would know the hearts of those who would believe in Christ, if (or when) they hear the gospel. God’s foreknowledge of their eventual faith in Christ would not have to be predicated on His unconditionally electing them to faith. In the eternal mind of God, these people were ordained to eternal life because their faith was foreknown. Some of these people may have been like Cornelius in Acts 10. Cornelius was evidently a humble believer in the real God by virtue of his faith in the natural revelation of God, the law written on his heart, and any revelation he may have gleaned from the Jews. He was already living a life of contrite faith, based on what he knew of God, before Peter brought him the good news of Christ. Thus predisposed to the truth, he was quick to receive the Son because he already knew the Father. Later, we will look again at the somewhat controversial experience of Cornelius in chapter 12.

Likewise, Luke does not say that these Gentiles in Antioch were appointed *to be believers*; this is what the Calvinist must ultimately prove. If Cornelius and these Gentiles in Antioch had died before hearing the gospel, they would have been saved by virtue of their repentance and faith in the limited truth, which they already had.

This text could also simply mean that God knows ahead of time, which unbelievers will come to salvation by believing the gospel. In this sense, they are appointed to eternal life. The Lord knows His sheep but this does not necessarily mean that He must have chosen them unconditionally to be believers.

None of these texts will be able to answer our original question regarding God's desire for the eternal destiny of every baby born. Scripture clearly lists the predestined blessings of those who do believe, but it does not offer an explicit explanation of *how* they acquired the ability to believe. Ephesians 1:13 confirms that salvation, and all of its benefits, comes through *hearing and believing the truth*.

By now we all should be able to agree that the terms and conditions of the plan of salvation were drawn up by God alone. He made the plan of salvation before He made Adam. God obviously must have foreseen the fall (or at least the possibility of it) and formulated His plans before Adam fell in the garden.

There is no place in Scripture, which explicitly teaches that some sinners were predestined, unconditionally and irresistibly, to be believers. This would be an easy thing to state and understand if it were in the Bible. But it's not.

5.4 THE SHORT ANSWER TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Before we move on, some may still be struggling with God's willingness to foresee evil coming and permit it to infest His very good creation in the first place. It does get tiresome listening to the "wiser than God" skeptics who won't trust Him in spite of all the magnificent evidence for the trustworthiness of God that is right in front of their eyes. They witness it everyday and every night. If they would look, thoughtfully, to the visible glories of creation then they would not find its invisible Creator so hard to trust. It is not my intention here to write

a book on why God allows evil but Paul's prayer for the Ephesians explains it better than anything I know of:

. . . that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. [Eph 3:17-19](#)

Comprehending and experiencing the depths of God's love would simply be impossible without the entrance of evil. That makes evil worth the trouble, so to speak, in the mind of God. The "beauty" of God's holiness could not be fully appreciated without the backdrop of our sin. Also, there is no way that anyone could know the extent of God's love without being affected by, and infected with, evil. In fact, it is reasonable to assert that the more sin is allowed to infest our world, the more we will be able to know and appreciate the immense depth of God's mercy and grace.

This does not mean that sin is a good thing, in and of itself. Sin is a bad thing that God can wonderfully bring good out of. **If we really believed the message of the cross, properly, we'd be done over-worrying about the problem of evil.** There is no sin or injustice ever done on earth, which cannot be repaired, both permanently and gloriously, in heaven. An old song about Johnny Cash, Dennis Hopper and other hard living sinners asks, "If the goin' up was worth the come'n down?"⁴ Likewise, in the eternal sense, everyone will eventually agree that the goin' up was worth the goin' down. Every sinner can enjoy the indescribable joy and pleasure of the presence of God. It is there for the taking . . . by faith. We may enjoy a taste of it in this life and may drink freely from the unfathomable depths of that Spring forever. God desires everyone to know Him, to glorify Him, and enjoy Him forever. Evil will never make sense to those who reject the hope of heaven. Their hope is restricted to this life only and this cuts them off from the very answer to their questions. I hope to prove, biblically, that no individual has ever been deliberately excluded from this hope, before being born.

As we will see further, the problem of evil is much harder for the historical Calvinist to explain. He does not believe that the cross was

intended to help *everyone* in any salvific or eternal sense. If you were not chosen for salvation then this life would be as good as it gets, and for millions this life is really quite . . . miserable. Therefore the Calvinist's explanation for the problem of evil, to those not chosen is, "Sorry about your luck . . . or your Providence. It's too bad you weren't chosen like me. I guess you shouldn't have been in Adam when he ate the forbidden fruit." He might even suggest, "God is using your reprobation to help me appreciate my unconditional election."

(Phewee! That has a really bad smell.)

6.0 Reprobation—The Unintended Consequence

Reprobate. The word even sounds ugly . . . like a cuss word. We have already seen Calvinistic reprobation lurking about in the shadows of the previous chapters. It is time to jerk the varmint out of its hole for a closer look in the light of Scripture and evident reason. Let's be careful though, it is a word found in the Bible, but not necessarily in the Calvinistic sense. The word reprobate means rejected, castaway, or proven unfit. We are told that the original word is a metallurgical term used for coins or metal that did not pass muster for purity. Sometimes it is translated "debased." Most understand it to mean something (or someone) rejected for a known reason.

Calvinists use the term "reprobate" to describe those specific individuals who (in their view) were not chosen to be believers before the foundation of the world. They would be the non-elect. They would be the individual souls who have no real hope of salvation because God did not elect them to be saved. **In the Reformed view, there is no plan of salvation for the reprobate. God does not promise to save them if they meet the condition of repentance and faith.** This would be a mockery of a promise because God has made no provision for their salvation, and they would have no God given ability to believe. As we saw in Chapter 3 and Section 6 of the Westminster Confession, Calvinism teaches that Jesus did not die for the reprobate. They aren't supposed to be saved.

I don't think most Calvinists relish the idea that some people could never be saved. What probably happened is that they were trying so hard to protect salvation by grace from salvation by works that they over-corrected, and created a doctrinal monster. Those who invented the automobile probably never intended to create a machine that would enable the violent and un-natural death of millions of people. They were trying to help us get around better. We might refer to this as the law of un-intended consequences. It happens a lot.

6.1 A LITTLE GIRL AND A BIG TRUCK

Hypothetical illustrations of Calvinistic election and its dreadful afterbirth, reprobation, are numerous, but they are rarely used by Calvinists. One opportunity for illustration is provided by Mark Driscoll

in his sermon series and book, Religion Saves + 9 Other Myths.¹ In his message on predestination, Mark told the real life story of his young daughter who would playfully, and deliberately, run towards the street in front of their house. This was in spite of his admonitions never to go into the street. On one occasion, his daughter ran straight for the street and did not heed his commands to stop. While screaming for her to stop, Mark ran after her and pulled her from the path of an oncoming truck that almost hit them both. He explained that this was like the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination. Sinners are so dead in sin that they do not heed God's warnings and cannot choose to repent. They must be saved by benevolent force. It was a powerful, dramatic, and effective illustration of *irresistible grace*.

The problem for Calvinists is that this could also provide an effective illustration of *reprobation*. If Mark had said that the same thing happened with one of his other kids and he decided to let the truck hit him, then that would have been an excellent illustration of reprobation in the Calvinistic system. In their view, God does not give everyone the common grace needed to receive salvation via repentance and faith. Therefore, He must save irresistibly, and He only chooses to save some sinners. Penitent faith is not really a requirement in their system of salvation. There really aren't any human requirements for salvation in their system. Mark is left with the impossible task of trying to explain how his illustration leaves any room for meaningful faith and genuine repentance. His daughter certainly played no essential role in her deliverance. Daddy simply rescued her. (Monergistically, if you like.)

6.2 WHAT MUST I DO TO BE REPROBATE?

In the Calvinistic view, the answer to this question is nothing. Absolutely nothing. Reprobation would already be done to you by virtue of Adam's sin and the sovereign decree of God. The reprobate would be punished forever for being what they were born to be. If this makes sense to you then you may like being a Calvinist.

As we will see, historical Calvinism teaches that the reprobate were *not* left without hope as a result of anything they actually did wrong, nor are they passed over for salvation based on anything which God foresaw they would actually do wrong. They would be damned without hope because God foresaw what

Adam would do wrong, and He will hold them guilty for it, as soon as they are conceived in their mother's womb. Somehow, we would all be individually condemned in a way that is independent of our own thoughts and actions. Let that sink in for a minute. That is not merely an inference . . . it is a *mega* inference. It is an egregious inference.

We should note that there are a few Calvinists, who are not quite comfortable holding one person accountable for the sin of another. Therefore, they cloud the issue by saying that the reprobate only suffer the inevitable consequences of Adam's sin. (See Calvin's Institutes 2.1.8) This sounds better than overtly blaming everyone for Adam's sin, until you realize that they also assume the reprobate will never be given any ability to repent, and Jesus did not die for them. It is a spurious distinction, which does not really change the injustice or the fatalism. It does present a little better than the traditional Reformed explanation because it sounds more like the non-Calvinistic teaching. Careful presentation at this point is crucial to the survival of the Calvinistic system. As a Calvinist, if you choose to be clear on reprobation, it will cost you some followers. It is best for Calvinistic teachers to dance around their doctrine of reprobation whenever possible.

Calvinistic reprobation is one weird doctrine. I don't think God appreciates the pastors, teachers, and theologians who make Him out to be a Heavenly Father who does not act to save each one of His "offspring" from impending peril. It is a tragedy when earthly fathers do not love all of their children, especially the children who are not as naturally intelligent, clever, athletic, or good looking as their siblings. It is an affront to the biblical caricature of God when we teach that He hates some of His own creation so much that He would not lift a finger to save them from sins they could not prevent. **It is even worse to assume that God damns someone for the inevitable effects of another person's sin. In spite of their feeble denials, this is exactly what Calvinism does.**

God does not love in word only. He loves every sinner in deed and in truth. 1 John 3:18 He sent His only begotten Son to save them. If they perish in hell, they will do so over Jesus' dead body, which is now a resurrected body. The love demonstrated in the sacrifice of Christ gives the gospel its tremendous power to save souls and to change minds. God leads by example. His perfect character did not require Him to suffer for the ungodly but He chose to. The cross also justifies

the severity of the punishment for those who hear the gospel Truth and reject it.

Calvinists are not uniformly clear as to why the reprobate were rejected for any hope of salvation. This is not their favorite topic in the debate. One writer for Ligonier's Tabletalk entry for May 30, 2008 said the following as it relates to the hardening effect of the parables on the reprobate:

Our focus is not to be on why God has not chosen some. Instead, we must be thankful that He has made us, who are no more deserving than the reprobate, to see the kingdom.²

This miserable cop out would be the antithesis of the Golden Rule. It essentially says, "Let's not worry about our neighbor, who may be reprobate, and just be glad we are elect." Calvinistic reprobation is an ugly doctrine. The very spirit of it is anti-Christian. In their zeal to honor the sovereignty of God, Calvinists impugn the righteousness of God.

As a former Calvinist, I'm convinced that the main reason why Calvinists do not want to focus on reprobation is that they have such bizarre explanations for it. When they finally get around to addressing the question, they don't look so brilliant. You can probably agree that the terms "passed by" or "non elect" do sound better than the words rejected, reprobate, cursed, or hated, but they mean the same thing. No one will ever be able to say that Augustine, the Reformers, and the Puritans were not highly skilled wordsmiths.

6.3 CALVINISTIC REPROBATION IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The Westminster Confession of Faith continues in Chapter 3 Section 7 with the following:

The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extends or withholds mercy as He pleases, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.³

This section of the Confession says that God will be sending the reprobate to hell for *their sin*. That would certainly make sense but this explanation leaves out the rest of their story. The Confession does not tell us that “*their sin*,” would be utterly inevitable, and they will not be given any ability to repent of it. Calvinists are notorious for leaving out the most objectionable implications of their doctrine. This is such a place. Calvinists are usually very thorough, but not in their defense of reprobation. They do not want to spend a lot of time on this aspect of their system. I think it is much like using an outhouse, or portable toilet. You just get in and get out as quickly as possible. They believe it is a necessary doctrine . . . but they know that it stinks.

In the spirit of fairness, we should be quick to note that most Calvinists do not teach that God has unconditionally chosen some innocent souls to be damned. We need to acknowledge this. They teach that God decided not to save them from *their guilt* for (and/or the inevitable consequences of) Adam’s sin. This might appear to help, but it doesn’t fix the error.

As we will soon see, this gets especially wacky when you realize that most traditional Calvinists would admit that the reprobate are denied any hope of eternal life based on a sin *which they did not actually commit*. Nevertheless, this single sin, which was committed before they were born, by someone else, would be the justification for God’s eternal rejection of *them*. That conclusion is just too bizarre. We simply should not buy that, as biblical, without explicit proof texts. Inferences will not do the job at such a crucial point.

This is where Calvinism really gets confusing. Once again, for clarity and emphasis, their position insists that Adam’s sin, and its inevitable consequences would be the justification for God’s eternal rejection of the reprobate, even though Adam’s sin took place before they were born.

I am also glad to report that most Calvinists don’t think it would be just of God to punish someone eternally for *no reason at all*. I am certain that most Calvinists would call that blasphemous nonsense “Hyper Calvinism”, “Extreme Calvinism”, or just plain ridiculous. Most Christians, including most Calvinists, would teach that hell is a place of just punishment. It is not a dumpster, wherein God throws away eternal souls (who were made in His image) as garbage. Nevertheless, the problem for Calvinists is found in justifying God’s alleged decision

to damn people based on a sin they did not commit, (or the inevitable consequences of a sin they did not commit).

We will expand on this as we go along, but I, for one, have a big problem with the assumption that transgressions of the law of God, which are utterly unpreventable, can be punished as if they could be prevented. In my simple mind, there is a clear difference between a sin, which is committed in spite of the ability to resist it, and a sin, which is committed as the utterly unpreventable result of Adam's sin. I tend to think of God as a just judge, and I can't bring myself to insist that there is any justice in punishing a person for committing a sin, which they were utterly unable to resist committing. I would hold this truth to be self-evident and that is what makes it somewhat difficult to defend. In my mind, this shouldn't need much defense but I am not as smart as Calvinistic theologians. If this is the "Libertarian" view of justice then I guess I am Libertarian on this issue. I don't care what we call it. I just want to get it right.

The Calvinistic explanation for the inevitable damnation of reprobate souls is not found in the Bible. It is a gratuitous inference that sidesteps the truly conditional nature of the biblical salvation and condemnation. The Bible teaches that men will be condemned for *their own actual and impenitent sins*. Those in hell will have ultimately suppressed the truth in unrighteousness . . . on their own . . . in light of the truth to which they have been exposed. Rom 1-2 In one statement, nuanced Calvinists will acknowledge that God would not eternally reject an individual for no reason in them. Yet as we have already seen, in another place, they will say that the eternal destinies of the souls of men are "not conditional." They can't have it both ways.

We need to make this point for a good reason. Sometimes in their explanation of reprobation, Calvinistic teachers will sound as if there is *no* reason, in the reprobate sinner, for God's rejection of them. This makes *them* look like a layman with a Bible dictionary instead of trained scholars. They really can't have it both ways. Either the rejection of the reprobate was based on some foreseen evil or it was not. As you may already know, and we will eventually see, they are prone to this misrepresentation of their own position because they use Romans 9 as the primary proof text for their understanding of election and reprobation.

As we will see, it is virtually impossible to show from Romans 9 that the salvation of the elect *is not conditional* but the damnation of the reprobate *is conditional*. This is because they have the context of Romans 9 wrong. We will eventually spend considerable time in Romans 9, where we find Paul's explanation of God's choosing Jacob over Esau. Esau will be cited, by the Reformed camp, as an example of the reprobate regarding salvation. Calvinists teach that the selection of Jacob, in Romans 9, is about salvation. Our non-Calvinist teaches that it is not about salvation.

It bears repeating that Calvinists are trying to protect the doctrines of grace from any contamination of *merit*. It is an important point and a noble pursuit. They are trying to protect us from our natural inclination to presume that we are, in some way, saved by our own works of righteousness. But they are like an overprotective mother who excessively quarantines her kids to keep them from getting germs. She means well, but it's a needless and harmful over reaction.

Reprobation is a very weak link in the Calvinistic chain of thought. Some will admit it and some won't. One way you can tell it is a weak spot in their case is by the amount of ink (and discussion) it *doesn't* get. Reprobation gets ignored as much as possible. Another way in which they expose the weakness of their view is the degree of animation and soap opera drama, which is often used when they do get around to defending it. Turning up the volume, animation, and passion is an old ploy in debate that is often used to deflect attention from the weakness of an argument. (Teenagers are really good at it . . . so are lawyers.)

In spite of their collective brilliance, the more that Calvinists try to defend their view of reprobation . . . the worse they look. The glaring contradiction between the universal call of the gospel and the Calvinistic view of reprobation is sharp and plain. They are not compatible.

Many a Calvinistic preacher will begin a sermon by trying to teach that God, in some nebulous way, desires every sinner to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. They will then go on to teach that God *does not* desire every sinner to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Calvinists are usually very logical, yet at this point, many Calvinists simply look the other way. They recognize the contradiction but they prefer to let Martin Luther and Jonathan Edwards try to resolve it. I think many Christians and pastors call themselves Calvinists

because they prefer to err on the side of irresistible grace, rather than be perceived as teaching justification by the law. They assume that repentance is something you could brag about. Maybe they just want to be on the same team as all the big name theologians. There would seem to be some safety there.

Perhaps, one of the most palatable ways that I have seen reprobation defined by Calvinists is in the New Dictionary of Theology by IVP. It was edited by Sinclair Ferguson, David Wright, and J.I. Packer. On pages 528-530 under Predestination it reads:

The problem came with the negative side of predestination, commonly known as reprobation. The doctrine of reprobation teaches that God, according to his sovereign will, passes over some sinners, leaving them in their sins, and at last, condemns them for their sins.

It then goes on to say,

to many this doctrine seems harsh, unjust and determinate.⁴

No kidding? How could anyone think it is too harsh, even unjust, for God to eternally punish someone in a place called “the lake of fire” for being irresistibly stuck in *Adam* before they were born, and then becoming a natural born sinner who is only “free” to do more evil, and then for failing to embrace the way of salvation in which they had no ability to embrace, and was never intended for them to begin with? Seems fair to me . . . it’s only a little worse than torturing a quadriplegic for not running a 4 minute mile, or beating a two year old for failing to finish Moby Dick before supper. Forget harsh. It’s sick. At least they admit it’s a “problem.”

The reason this definition of reprobation may not seem so bad is that it is quite incomplete. Again, the best way to defend Calvinism is to omit the objectionable stuff. Their definition *should* read:

The problem came with the negative side of predestination, commonly known as reprobation. The doctrine of reprobation teaches that God, according to his sovereign will, passes over some sinners, leaving them in their sins, and at last, condemns them for their sins. [*And their damnable sins will have been altogether unpreventable. They could not prevent being created in*

[Adam and going down with him in the fall, and thus they could not prevent being “dead on arrival” at birth, whereby they are only “free” to commit “splendid vices,” and therefore they were not able to embrace the gospel offer, which was never really intended to save them anyway].

This is why the reaction against the doctrine is often so heated. Calvinists should quit pretending that it is the “Pelagian pride” of our corrupted nature, which is the real reason we object to their “harsh, unjust, and determinate” views. That is an unfounded and unsubstantiated accusation. That is about as fair as the accusation that all Calvinists love their view of election because they enjoy basking in the doctrines of God’s partiality, and it is their pride, that wants to believe they are God’s favorites.

As stated in the New Dictionary, one wonders why anyone would consider reprobation harsh or unjust. Anyone can read the Bible and understand that God is leaving some people in their sins, but when you add that their reprobation is essentially unpreventable, and the gospel is not designed to provide them any eternal hope, that is a different animal altogether. Again, we see in their own definition of reprobation, that careful *presentation* is essential to being able to stomach the truly fatalistic and unjust conclusions of their system. They must avoid clear explanations of their most objectionable points.

In the next chapter, we will see in more detail, how veteran Calvinists realize that the best way to justify this doctrine is to hold every person ever conceived responsible for the sin of Adam, before it happened. We will also see that it can’t be defended by using explicit biblical texts, and it is a strange doctrine to be settled on by inference.

Here, in their doctrine of reprobation, Calvinistic interpreters violate the previously mentioned principle of Bible study. They allow that which could be *inferred* in Scripture to over rule that which is *explicit* in Scripture. The Bible nowhere gives such a definition of “in Adam.” **The Bible teaches, more clearly, that Adam’s posterity did not commit the sin in the garden, that sin is not imputed when there is no law, and that we don’t start sinning until after we are born.** Rom 5:14; Rom 5:13; Rom 9:11 Scripture also teaches that the hope of salvation from the consequences of Adam’s sin is provided for every sinner. That hope is in Christ.

Let’s make one more quick observation regarding the Calvinistic teaching on reprobation. Calvinists must be very careful not to teach

that God is longsuffering with the reprobate. In their system, God is not, at all, patient with the reprobate. To use a baseball analogy, it is one foreseen strike, before you were born, and you are out . . . eternally. One might even say that God is quick to anger regarding the reprobate. They get the eternal death sentence before they would ever suppress any truth or commit any sins. Calvinists could not logically claim that God is patient and longsuffering in the case of the reprobate.

6.4 THE UNIVERSAL CALL AND REPROBATION

Calvinistic reprobation means that God does not desire, in any meaningful sense, the salvation of every individual. Never has. Never will. The most consistent Calvinists will acknowledge this. Others attempt to maintain that God somehow desires to save those who He refuses to elect to salvation. (I trust you can see the absurdity of such a distinction.) Their doctrine teaches that God has never desired every individual to enjoy Him forever, even though Scripture and the Westminster Catechism both teach that He does. The gospel would not be good news for the reprobate. It would only be a false hope.

Calvinistic reprobation flies in the face of the universal call to “all men everywhere” to repent. It is on a collision course with every scripture that suggests God really desires “that the world through Him might be saved.” John 3:17 The Reformed view runs contrary to Jesus’ prayer in John 17:21, “that the world may believe” that the Father sent Him. Likewise, it runs contrary to John’s explanation of why he wrote his gospel: “. . . that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” John 20:31 John did not address his gospel to believers alone, nor was it meant for Jews alone.

In his famous evangelistic sermon entitled, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, Jonathan Edwards warned his hearers, that the

wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation.

He told the congregation that they

have an opportunity to obtain salvation.

He said that they had

an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners . . .⁵

After a graphic and relentless description of the fierceness of God's impending wrath on any who were in an "unregenerate state," "out of Christ," and "hanging over the pit of hell," he finally told them what to do. He told them to "awake and fly from the wrath to come." Get out of Sodom, as it were, and don't look back.

We might be tempted to assume that this congregation, in Enfield, was a pretty wicked bunch of churchgoers to warrant such a ferocious assault. However, we shouldn't jump to that conclusion. I find it interesting that Edwards never mentions any particular sins in the entire diatribe that would provoke God to be so furious with them. Edwards says there is "reason to think" a great part of his hearers are "undoubtedly" unbelievers; yet he admits, in the sermon, that he does not know who they are. This is very revealing. It is also quite logical for a Reformed teacher. As I have been arguing, this debate is all about their views on original sin combined with their rejection of the proper understanding of God's common grace. Calvinists can preach entire sermons railing against sin without accusing their hearers of any specific sin, or confessing one of their own.

In the sermon, Edwards addressed both "unconverted children" and "little children." He included them among the ranks of those who were 10,000 times more abominable in God's sight than the most detestable venomous snake is in ours. (This gem comes from the man who some have called "America's greatest theologian.") This will be one of the reasons that Edwards' influence has been tragically limited, in spite of his brilliance and dedication to the kingdom. Gladly, he did not call out the babies in his sermon but he could have. It would make no difference. I hope to show that this kind of assault on children, and the flawed doctrine behind it, cannot be biblically justified. This distortion of the character of God flies in the face of Christ's handling of children, and His dealings with most adult sinners.

The sermon may sound like the misguided anger of an immature or disillusioned minister, but I doubt that it is. Edwards is logically

trying to put his doctrine of original sin into practice. In his system, you don't have to actually do anything wrong to be loathsome to God. *All you have to do is be born.* In the next chapter, we will examine the Calvinistic doctrine that leads to this view of the guilt of children and little children. We will try to determine, biblically, if any little children are abhorred by God.

I hope you are beginning to see the reason why we began this study talking about a newborn baby. It is not what you may have suspected. Emotions aside, this question is at the heart of the doctrinal debate over election.

Don't get me wrong. There is a place for sermons, which threaten unbelievers with the impending wrath of God. "Tough love" sermons can be born of true compassion for sinners and zeal for the honor of God. We know that Jesus and the prophets sometimes used severe language with those who were the biggest hypocrites, and thus, the most wicked. Nevertheless, in those situations there was never any doubt about the particular sins for which God would bring His judgments. Again, I stress that Edwards admits that he doesn't even know who they are, in the congregation, who would be in such impending danger. *He has no idea who they are*, yet he speaks as if they are so evil that they make Jezebel look like Mary Poppins. In the biblical reproofs, there was no mystery as to what the people had actually done to deserve God's righteous anger. We should give Edwards some credit for integrity here. His sermon properly reflects his doctrine far more than most who have called themselves Calvinists. This is Calvinism consistently taught.

There is another bone to pick from Edwards' sermon. If Calvinism is true, then it is a simply a lie to tell someone who is reprobate that they could have an "opportunity to obtain salvation." If the Reformed doctrine of unconditional election is true, then the reprobate will never have any real opportunity to be saved. It would be a lie to say that the "door of mercy" would ever be open to the reprobate. They couldn't wake up and flee the wrath to come because God would hate them and would not give them the ability to wake up. If God loved them, then He would wake them up, or at least, give them the ability to meet the condition of salvation. Even if it were said in ignorance, it would still be a huge lie for an ambassador of Christ to offer salvation to someone who God doesn't want to save. In their system, hell would

freeze over before the reprobate would have a genuine opportunity to be saved. The only people who would have an “opportunity” to obtain salvation would be the elect; they could not avoid being saved.

It is important to note that Edwards did not actually say that God loved everyone in this congregation, but he did say that they had an *opportunity* to be saved. This would imply that God has made a genuine provision for their salvation. Edwards said that Jesus had thrown the door of mercy wide open to them and He was calling out to them. (For the reprobate, who might be “trembling” over their actual sins, this would be like Lucy pretending to hold the football so Charlie Brown could kick it . . . if you know what I mean.) Do you think Jesus would throw the door of mercy wide open for those who were not chosen to receive mercy? This is not Jonathan Edwards at his best. This is not what Jesus meant when He said, “Many are called, but few are chosen.”

Mt 22:14

There is no such thing as an “opportunity” to be saved in the Calvinistic system. It is absurd to suggest that the “non elect” will ever have an opportunity to be “elect”. In the Calvinistic system, it would be a misunderstanding to think that God desires every person to be saved and come to the knowledge of the Truth. 1 Tim 2:4 Many babies would be born reprobate. In their system, God does not really want every person to love the Lord Jesus Christ, yet they will be accursed if they don’t. 1 Cor 16:22 Calvinism is confusing.

Thus, the following question looms large in all of this: Why would God pretend to offer salvation (or command repentance and faith) to a sinner who He has no intention of saving? Must we accept disingenuous as an attribute of God? I don’t think so and neither do the most conscientious Calvinists. **The veteran Calvinist would never plainly state that the gospel is a good faith promise of salvation to every sinner.** He might slip up and infer it in an evangelistic appeal, but He does not really believe that it is. He is certain that God has not made a promise of eternal life to every sinner. The promise is only to those who are “children of the promise.” We will let Edwards say it himself. The following is a quote from his Sermon IV of Seventeen Occasional Sermons, entitled God’s Sovereignty in the Salvation of Men (Romans 9:18). In section II, #2 he says,

For God has in no way obliged Himself to any natural man by his word to bestow salvation upon him. Men in a natural condition are not the children of promise; but lie open to the curse of the law, which would not be the case if they had any promise to lay hold of.⁶

This begs the question: Are the elect “children of the promise” in their natural state? Was Saul of Tarsus a child of the promise when he was in a “natural state,” or was he open to the curse? How could God consider the *elect* “open to the curse” before He saves them, but children of the promise after He saves them? This makes no sense. If someone is elect, by the Calvinistic definition, then he/she could never be open to the curse. It makes no difference if they know it or not.

The gospel is a trustworthy promise from a trustworthy God to all individual sinners. However, the promise of salvation has a meaningful independent condition, which may be met by the common grace of God.

When you listen to Calvinists, go through their twists and turns trying to defend their position on reprobation you rarely hear the universal call get mentioned. It gets ignored. It must be ignored to avoid the implication that they are confused, or worse yet, that God is confused. It makes no sense to say that God offers salvation to every sinner, or commands every person to repent, and at the same time hold that He does not give everyone the ability to repent and believe. Thus, they don’t like to mention the two at the same time. The good faith promise of the gospel to every sinner is a big reason the Reformed system doesn’t hold up.

6.5 USING THE DOUBLE MEANING TO OBSCURE

The context of evangelism is a place where the double meaning can come in handy for the Calvinist. As an example, when speaking on the means of grace in his series entitled Predestination, R. C. Sproul said that missionaries are sent to preach the gospel

so that *people* may hear and come to faith.⁷

This is a true statement, but what R. C. means by “people”, and what others may interpret “people” to mean are two very different things. He must mean the “chosen” people, because, in his view, they are the only people who will be given the ability to hear and come to faith. They are the only people that will receive the gift of faith. Using the word “people” instead of saying “the elect people” muzzles the impact of his view of reprobation. It allows the inference that all individual people *can* hear and come to faith without plainly denying it. This avoids the need to explain that the reprobate can’t repent because God refuses to give them the desire to repent. This is another example of how presentation is critical to the propagation of their system. Again, it’s like dressing up a baked potato. It changes the look but not the substance.

Calvinists often try to make their doctrine sound like non-Calvinism to avoid the startling conclusion of their system. If Calvinists really believe these doctrines are biblical then they should quit beating around the bush and just say it: “Salvation is irresistible for some, and it’s impossible for others”. It’s not that complicated. It is just too costly to deliver the bottom line all at once, and in such plain language.

Again, if you don’t think that this is a fair presentation, then we only need to ask one question. What essential aspect of salvation can be resisted by the elect? The answer: No essential aspect of salvation can be resisted by the elect. It’s not effectual call or regeneration; therefore it is not repentance and faith. It is not justification or redemption. Not adoption. Not glorification. It can’t be earthly sanctification because that would make them Arminians, or even Pelagians, and no one would be saved because no one is sinless.

To be clear and fair, Christians who are not Calvinistic must come to grips with the knowledge that God does not *want, or will*, to save every sinner, *in the sense* that He refuses to force salvation graciously upon them. Hell exists. It will be occupied by some of the “offspring” of God. God has sovereignly ordained that we are each capable of rejecting the truth and He will send us to hell for it. Whatever hell turns out to be . . . it will be an appropriate place for those who love sin more than God, and do not want Him to be in their lives. **God does desire the salvation of every person but he does not decree it.** His love for all men is evident in the New Testament gospel and Great Commission. For the effects of the cross to be justly imputed, sinners

must relinquish all hope in their own righteousness, and voluntarily exercise humble faith. Rom 3:26; Phil 3:3-8; 1 John 1:9

We must stop trying to pretend that salvation has no meaningful requirement in order to protect grace from legalism. We must be clear that salvation is truly conditional, on the obedience of penitent faith, which is something that can't be boasted of. Confessing our sin, admitting our helplessness, and trusting the blessed promises of the gospel are not the same as keeping the law to be saved. If you are proud of your faith then you have the wrong kind.

6.6 THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

The Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation sounds more like something Satan would whisper in our ear than something God has declared in His word. I am sure that the Devil would like nothing more than to convince every sinner that he/she is reprobate with no hope of being forgiven. I'm sure he would love for each one of us to think that we have no power of contrary choice in our eternal destiny; therefore, there is no need to *do* anything about it. Satan would like it if he could get us to assume that we must passively wait until God does something "supernatural" *to* us, before we can have any hope. **I have no doubt that the Devil enjoys the confusion created by a system that says you can't do anything to be saved . . . but you must do something to be saved.**

I would hate to think that some souls would never reap the joy and peace of God because they were waiting for God to work an irresistible miracle on their "will". The Enemy of our souls would like for each of us to think that we have only one real choice in our eternal destiny, and that choice has already been pre-determined. The great tragedy of the Calvinistic doctrine of unconditional election is that it portrays the LORD as a God, who does not genuinely desire every sinner to be forgiven, in spite of all the biblical evidence that says He does. It quenches the spirit of the cross. I'm afraid their doctrine of reprobation may say more about Calvinists, themselves, than it does the biblical God. The Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation is one of the Devil's most cunning tactics in preventing sinners from enjoying the peace of God.

Gladly, if you take your kids to most Calvinistic churches they won't get much teaching on reprobation in Sunday School, or other youth programs. Reprobation is not a doctrine that is often taught to children. It obviously could be confusing. In reality, the adults rarely ever get around to discussing it, but this can't be because it is a minor issue. Salvation is a pretty important topic for every age. Nevertheless, most Calvinists that I've known prefer to keep the topic of reprobation under wraps as much as possible in the meetings of the Church. You'll find the topic of reprobation deep within big books that few ever read. (This is a good thing, I suppose.) They know it is a necessary result of their system but they are not real proud of it. Even John Calvin called it a "dreadful" or "horrible" decree. (I guess it depends on who translates Book 3, Chapter 23, and section 7 of the Institutes.)⁸

If you want to be called a hyper Calvinist just start talking about reprobation. (Any flavor . . . Supra, Infra, Chocolate Chip, it doesn't really matter.) The Reformed doctrine of reprobation announces, loud and clear, that God does not desire the salvation of every child ever born. The attempts to justify it range from bad to worse. Calvinistic reprobation says NO . . . to all the scripture that suggests God sincerely desires every man, woman, and child to be reconciled to Him, and enjoy Him forever. It is better for the Calvinist to be Norman Vincent Peale on this issue by accentuating the positive side of the coin when presenting their views. They don't flip the coin over. They merely talk about how gracious it is of God to save anybody and they can usually skate by and look pretty sound. I confess. I've been there and done that. **The Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation has the fingerprints of religious man all over it.**

7.0 Were You There when Adam Ate the Fruit?

Mr. Sayers, you have been charged with eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, in the Garden of Eden, how do you plead?

“I’ve been charged with what?”

Eating from the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. What is your plea?

“Your Honor, I don’t recall ever even seeing the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Is it in Michigan?”

Sir! Answer the question or be held in contempt. I remind you that you are under oath.

“Well Your Honor . . . uh . . . Sir . . . I . . . uh . . . I’m not really sure what to say . . . umm . . .”

Stop wasting the court’s time. You have been charged with eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. How do you plead?

“Not guilty, Your Honor. I have done plenty of sinful things in my life but that’s not one of them. I don’t deny being a sinner, but with God as my witness, I didn’t eat off that tree. Perhaps I would have if I had been there, but I wasn’t there. I wasn’t even born yet.”

Some Calvinists will say, that the Bible says, I did it. They would say that I was somehow “in Adam” and I ate the forbidden fruit. Other, more sophisticated Calvinists will admit that I didn’t *actually* do it, since I hadn’t been born yet, but *I am still guilty* of it because I am a descendant of the man who did do it. Still other Calvinists will admit that I didn’t actually eat from the tree and I am not being held accountable for that sin. They would say that I have irresistibly inherited a corrupt nature that *will inevitably cause my damnation* unless I am chosen to receive the gift of faith. It can get pretty confusing, and the subtle disparity of opinion among professing Calvinists exposes the tenuous nature of their conclusions.

To be fair, much of our debate is found in discovering the meaning of the biblical expression “in Adam.” As noted, back in Chapter 4, the historical Reformed view teaches that Adam was my divinely appointed representative in the Garden of Eden, and his guilt is “imputed” to my account. (This is supposed to make it seem more reasonable . . . somehow.) They know that Adam’s sin took place long before I was born, but I am still somehow to blame for sinning “in Adam.” It makes about as much sense as claiming that Eve was my wife, in Adam, or that I named the animals, in Adam.

Don’t feel too sorry for me, though, they say you did it too. Everyone born into Adam’s race did it, or is somehow guilty of it, without having done it. They say we all did it deliberately in spite of the clear command not to. They would acknowledge that “we” did not have a sinful nature when “we” committed the sin. This means that “we” are even more without excuse for “our sin in Adam.”

Some Calvinists will maintain that “we” could have resisted “our” alleged sin in Adam. “We” had a true liberty of choice in the matter. “We” didn’t possess a sinful nature inclining (or urging) us to do it. Nevertheless, “we” yielded to the Devil’s temptation and therefore “we” are each to blame for being born with a sinful nature. (As some readers may be aware, this does cause some problems with their ultra deterministic way of thinking about human choices. More on that later.) This imputation of guilt is part of the historic Calvinistic understanding of the term “Original Sin.” Some call it “race sin.” Some prefer the term “inherited sin.” The practical implications are the same regardless of what you call it.

Let’s return to the Westminster Confession to help understand the key aspects of the Reformed view of original sin. Chapter 6 says:

1. Our first parents being seduced by the subtlety and temptation of Satan, sinned in eating the forbidden fruit. This their sin God was pleased, according to his wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to his own glory.
2. By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all faculties and parts of soul and body.

So far . . . so good. (That is, if you can get through the old-fashioned language.) I don't think many serious Bible readers would have a big problem with these first two points. The term "wholly defiled" is a little ambiguous but it is safe to say that Adam's mind and body were immediately affected by the sin. He could still walk, talk, hear the voice of God, and wear fig leaves but something was now terribly wrong. It is the following sections of the Confession where Calvinists and non-Calvinists don't see eye to eye. This is also, where Calvinists appear to disagree among themselves, but I think their disagreement is more terminology than substance. The Confession continues:

3. They [Adam and Eve] being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by ordinary generation.
4. From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.¹

The Confession is saying that we are all, indeed, guilty of Adam's sin, and we can't really desire (or do) anything right. We are led to believe that everyone is utterly helpless to combat our natural corruption; yet this is not what we observe in virtually all human beings. The Canons of Dort is a little more reasonable on this point. It says that we are all "incapable of *saving* good."² It is evident that God has implanted some ability within every person to resist our inherited corruption . . . sometimes. We will see that Scripture supports this observation. God has given everyone a measure of grace by which we may resist temptation and confess our sin when we do break God's law. When the typical Calvinist teaches on our natural corruption, as the consequence of Adam's fall, they downplay (or ignore) the common grace that we are each born with. As I see it, this is at the core of the whole debate.

One thing that we may want to admire about many Calvinists is a sensitive conscience. One might even think that they have a hyperactive conscience. We do need more conscience today, but Calvinists are taking blame for a sin, which they could not possibly have committed. The sin for which they are accepting responsibility took place before

they were born. I agree that both the fear of hell and love for God will incline us to a sensitive conscience, but we should be careful of any confession of sin that is not genuine.

I certainly can see how one could misinterpret Romans 5 and come to their conclusions. But it is an unattractive and unprofitable confession which takes the blame for someone else's sin, in which you played no role. It would be dishonest. Even Jesus did not admit to actually committing our sins when He agreed to take the punishment for them. (As you must know, it is essential to understand that Jesus never committed any sin.)

We should be convinced that we are personally culpable for a sin before we personally confess it, or our confession is disingenuous. Like any doctrinal error, it will hinder the spread of the gospel. If we command unbelievers to repent of a sin, which we all know they did not commit, then we sow confusion. It is difficult enough to get sinners under conviction for the sins, which they have committed, without trying to get them to accept blame for a sin, which they could not possibly have committed. I think the Great Awakening occurred in spite of this doctrine, not because of it.

7.1 ROMANS 5 AND 1 CORINTHIANS 15

Let's take a look at Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. They are the primary New Testament texts that speak of our relationship with Adam. In the NKJV, Romans 5:12-21 says:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned-(For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification. For if by the one man's offense death

reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.) Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

1 Corinthians 15:21-22 says:

For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.

Also, 1 Corinthians 15:42-49

So also is the resurrection of the dead. *The body* is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.

And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual. The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man

I hope you took the time to read the above texts. We are now in the epicenter of the debate. As mentioned before, we don't have a lot of biblical light on the specific outworking of God's eternal knowledge. If we did, we probably couldn't understand it anyway. Likewise, we don't have much biblical revelation on how the mind makes choices,

but we do have some information on what happened in the Garden of Eden, and what God expects of us.

The first observation of these texts is pretty obvious. The Bible does not teach that Adam's descendants committed the sin in the garden, and it does not explicitly say that we are all guilty of the sin in the garden. It makes no sense to say that we did not sin "according to the likeness" of Adam's transgression if we are being judged for Adam's transgression. If we did not sin in the same way, then we certainly could not have committed the same sin. We probably don't need the Bible to tell us that we did not sin in the garden, but thankfully, it does anyway.

For those who insist on upholding the Reformed company line on this issue, it is important to note that the word *imputed* is not in these texts. Not one time. We are shown to be distinct from Adam. Adam is said to be one man. He is never called our "Federal Head." The term is not even used in Scripture, let alone defined. The text does not say that "humanity" chose to sin in the garden. The Calvinistic interpretation is a very big and crucial *inference*. Paul says,

" . . . through one man sin entered the world."

If we were all culpable for the fall then this apostolic statement would be incorrect. It would have to read, through *all men*, sin entered the world. Adam's posterity clearly did not commit the sin in the garden. This is restated in verse 16 of Romans 5: "And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned." It must not be said that all men are guilty of the sin in the garden. The blame for sin's entrance into the world is laid squarely on the shoulders of the first man, Adam. Satan and Eve are not said to be ultimately responsible here in Paul's inspired doctrinal treatise. We know they both played a role, and we know that God dispensed a measure of temporal punishment to all three.

Every descendant of Adam will suffer the inevitable *temporal* consequences of this divine "condemnation", but none of them will have to perish in hell as the inevitable *eternal* consequence of this "judgment." It is also reasonable to believe that Adam, himself, would not necessarily suffer eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord . . . thanks to God's hidden plan in Christ. Adam could be

justified by faith but he will still suffer temporal separation from his Creator.

Men will battle the elements, make their living by the sweat of their brow, and then die. Likewise, women will go through great pain in childbearing and eventually die. As a result of God's judgment on Adam's sin, all mankind will inherit this corruption and die. But there is no mention of anyone going to hell because of this condemnation (or curse). Like it or not, it is the will of God for every affected soul to die physically (or biologically). We may cringe at the notion, but this is by far, the most credible explanation of sin and death out there. If medical science finds the cure to all forms of cancer and heart disease then we will die of something else. Our death is the immutable will of God.

Note also that Paul is quick to bring Jesus into the discussion. As soon as he states the problem of God's judgment on "all men", he immediately states the remedy of God's grace for "all men." Adam's fall does not merely affect all types of people or all nations of people. Adam's sin affects every single person. No individual is excluded from this "condemnation". "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive."

In Scripture, no one is ever said to be "born dead" as Calvinists often insist.

Note again, these texts in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 do not say anything about Adam being a "public person" or our "representative head." Paul is not trying to spread the blame for the fall. He is spreading the consequences of the fall, and this is a big difference. Indeed, the whole race will sin but they did not eat from the tree. **The Calvinistic explanation, which says we are "born guilty of Adam's sin," sounds more like the karma of Hinduism than biblical dogma. The notion that someone can deserve to perish in an eternal hell from the moment he or she is born, because of an ancestor's sin, is biblically and rationally unsustainable.**

Adam is said to be the first man. From his seed all of mankind would come. There is one physical race of people on earth. It is Adam's race. It should come as no surprise that all ethnic groups and cultures share the same problems. We all came from the same

man and inherited the same disease. But before we are too hard on Adam, we should be certain that we would not have done the same thing, if we were in his place. I can't say that I would not have done the same thing if I were in his place. I am only saying that I didn't eat off the tree. I didn't kill Abel either. I didn't get drunk after the flood. I didn't worship the Golden Calf. I did not participate in the ethnic slave trade in America. Neither did you. We weren't alive when those regrettable events took place. In the Bible, we are ultimately judged as individuals. We are not finally judged as an entire race, or as nations. This is not a Western or Americanized view of justice. It is the biblical view. Temporal judgments may sometimes be corporate in nature, but the eternal judgment is an individual judgment.

As promised, we will eventually look at Romans Chapter 9. For now, we will only note how Paul explained that Jacob and Esau did not do anything evil *before* they were born. Rom 9:11 Here again, we can be glad that Paul stated the obvious because Westminster Calvinism has everyone *guilty of sin* by the time we are born. Eating of the forbidden fruit would have been evil for both Jacob and Esau if they had done it. In the predominant Calvinistic view, everyone is guilty of Adam's sin in the garden, in spite of the fact that we did not actually eat from the forbidden tree. In fact, Adam's sin would be enough evil to warrant the eternal damnation of the entire race before anyone else was born . . . according to Calvinists.

7.2 IGNORANCE, ABILITY, AND THE IMPUTATION OF SIN

Let's examine a more sensible and biblical interpretation. To repeat, we know from Romans 9 that Jacob and Esau had not done any good or evil before they were born. As a result of God's curse on Adam, our first sins as small children are not really preventable. Thus, it is reasonable (for most of us) to think that the guilt of these sins would not be imputed to us . . . for two reasons. One is our ignorance of the law and the other would be our natural inability, as small children, to resist the power of our flesh. The guilt of these sins would be on Adam unless it is imputed to Christ. As small children, we are ignorant of God's law, although it certainly exists. Small children are not capable of knowing the law of God and sin is not imputed where there is no

law. Rom 5:13 Paul also taught that where there is no law there is no transgression. Romans 4:15. When you combine these texts with Jesus' teachings on children, and Paul's teaching about being "alive once without the law", it is reasonable to conclude that every child is born with original sin, but may be considered to be in a state of grace before God. Their sin as children is not imputed to their account. Rom 7:9

I believe that our natural sense of justice bears witness to this. It is reasonable to think that the sin of small children would not be imputed to their account. This would be due to their ignorance of the law and their obvious inability to combat their natural corruption. We might apply a measure of *corrective* punishment to small children in order to teach them right from wrong (and wise from foolish). However, most people don't think it would be right to sentence a child to life in prison the first time they tell a lie, or take something that does not belong to them. I would also be inclined to conclude that God would not hold small children worthy of eternal damnation, after their first lie. After all, it is Adam's sin, which caused them to be born with the natural inclination to lie.

As we mature, our understanding of the sinfulness of sin becomes clearer. This is true even if we are not raised in a Christian home. We also begin to develop the natural ability to do the things contained in the law, which is written on our hearts. Rom 2:14 Therefore, it is reasonable to think that grace will reign until the law enters our understanding and we begin to sin against the knowledge of the law, and in spite of the growing ability to understand sin and resist temptation. It would be right (or fair) for God to impute the guilt of our own deliberate sin to our own account. It would also be reasonable (and fair) for God to expect us to confess our own deliberate sin . . . if He gave us that ability.

When children die before God imputes the guilt of their sin to their account, they would be in a state of grace and enter the kingdom. Small children should not be viewed as righteous for the same reason that they should not be viewed as guilty. They can have no relationship to the law until they can knowingly break it. They are "made sinners" through Adam's transgression. Therefore, the sins of their childhood are inevitable. These sins are Adam's fault. But they would be covered by Christ's atonement for the sins of the world.

In Romans 7, Paul said that he was alive once without the law. Rom 7:9 He must have been referring to his time as a small child. It would have been before he was capable of understanding the natural law written on his heart. This would be the only time this “Hebrew of the Hebrews,” and “son of a Pharisee,” would not have known the law of God. Phil 3:5; Acts 23:6 The law did not have dominion over him because of his ignorance as a child. Paul then said, “When the commandment came, sin revived and I died.” **This is what it means to be dead in trespasses and sins. When God imputes the guilt of our own sin to our own account we become dead in trespasses and sins.** Adam was not a child when he committed his first sin, thus, he “died” that day. His sin was immediately imputed to his account. Again, the Bible never says that anyone was “born dead.” That is an unnecessary inference. We are born “in sin” but we are not born “dead in sin.”

As we grow older, we begin to sin willfully against the knowledge of the law and in spite of the common grace of God. When the guilt of this sin is imputed to us then we become dead in sin. We will need to be forgiven. We will need to be cleansed by the washing of regeneration. Titus 3:5 We will need to be justified by faith. This is why it is important to remember that Jesus used the humble faith of children as examples for faith in adults. Mt 18:2-5 As children, we obviously cannot avoid committing acts of sin but we can (and often do) experience a smitten conscience and true contrition. It is adults, who become hardened by continual sinning. Adults are the most reluctant to confess the guilt of their sins. This helps to explain why the evangelism of children has always been more fruitful than the evangelism of adults. It is a relatively easy thing to convince children of their need of Christ. It is when they “grow up” that they become hardened to the Spirit’s working in their conscience.

It is reasonable and biblical to believe that the sins committed by children in their ignorance and weakness are covered by the universal and irresistible application of the cross of Christ. Yet, the willful sins of adults who can recognize the law of God written on their hearts will not be forgiven unless they are confessed in true godly sorrow.
1 John 1:9

This distinction between the ignorance and inability of children and the knowledge and ability of adults makes the best sense of

how God could have “reconciled the world to Himself” in Christ, yet not everyone will be in heaven. 2 Cor 5:19 As children, our sin is not imputed. As adults, we must be justified by conscious faith in the truth, and Jesus is the Truth. Rom 5:1; John 14:6 Thus, there is a sense in which those who end up in hell will have lost their salvation. God truly desired their salvation but He refused to decree it. They chose to suppress the truth in unrighteousness. They did not want to *retain* the knowledge of God. Rom 1:18-32 They did not want to be at peace with God . . . and He will give them their way. They will have fallen from the grace they enjoyed as children.

This principle of ignorance, ability, and the imputation of guilt continues to be in effect for adults. Sinners will not be held responsible for revelation, which they never received. But they will be held responsible for revelation and ability which they have received. In John 15, Jesus was explaining to the disciples that the world would hate them. He also said some important things about ignorance and the imputation of guilt. He said,

If I had not come and spoken to them they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. John 15:22

Then He said,

If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would have no sin; but now they have seen and also hated both Me and My Father. John 15:24

Jesus is not saying that those who rejected Him weren’t sinners. He is saying that they could not be held accountable for receiving *Him* if they never heard of Him. However, these people not only heard *about* Jesus, but they heard His words and saw His miracles, in person. Jesus taught the same principle when He spoke to the Pharisees after healing the blind man in John 9. He said, “If you were blind you would have no sin . . .” John 9:41

We will not be condemned for sins that are the result of genuine ignorance. If you knew that Jesus was the Son of God and you neglected to follow Him then you will be held accountable for it. If you did not know anything about Jesus then you will not be held

accountable for failing to believe in Him. BUT you still could be held accountable for deliberately sinning against the light of truth revealed through nature and through your conscience. The ability to “do the things contained in the law” is a two edged sword. On one side, we can enjoy the blessedness of the man who keeps the law, but on the other side, we will be held accountable for that God given ability. Rom 2:14

Unto whom much is given . . . much will be required. Luke 12:48 As small children, we aren’t given much in terms of revelation . . . therefore God does not require much of us. The people who were eyewitnesses to the Light of the world will be held accountable for receiving that Light. As we saw in Chapter 5, if they were somehow blinded, or given a spirit of stupor, which prevented them from belief, then it stands to reason that their judgment will not be as severe. John 12; Rom 11

Scripture shows that that everyone is capable of right moral actions. Rom 2:14 We don’t do everything wrong, even as unbelievers. We all observe the effects of God’s common grace in spite of the devastating effect of Adam’s fall.

Both sides of this debate will agree that no one is perfectly righteous. Our non-Calvinist teaches that God’s common grace enables every person to do some things right but we are never good enough to be considered a “good person.” Jesus told the rich young ruler that there is no one good but God. Mt 19:16-22 Jesus also said that evil fathers still know how to give good gifts to their children. Mt. 7:11 Paul was also very clear, in Romans 3, that there is no one who is righteous. Both sides of our debate agree that we each need God’s mercy, but the Calvinist will not agree that lost sinners are capable of wanting mercy without external, supernatural, and irresistible help.

Ignorance may be our advocate on some sins but I would not hold out any hope that we would be able to plead ignorance on every sin that we have ever committed. Paul was very clear in Romans 1 and 2 that mankind will be without excuse before God. Every sane adult will have been exposed to enough of God’s law to be found guilty before Him. **Everyone will be accountable for humble faith because the invisible attributes of God are clearly seen in the visible creation.** Rom 1:20 We all need a Savior. Thank God, we have one. Jesus is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe. 1 Tim 4:10

The problem for those who avoid the Bible is that some of the Bible is written on their hearts. It goes with them wherever they go.

They can't get away from it. When they go to out and get drunk, the Bible is essentially with them. When they view porn or go to a strip club, the Word is in their hearts. When they commit adultery, Someone is watching. When they lie to their family, customers, congregation, students, stockholders, employees, and employers . . . the truth is still in their minds. The Spirit of Truth is the "Hound of Heaven." He won't leave us alone and that is a good thing. It may be annoying but it is the mercy of God restraining our corruption and urging us to repent. The law is like a personal trainer who takes our spiritual health very seriously. It draws us to Jesus. Ps 139:8; Gal 3:19-25

The presence of this inner conflict does not mean that we are "partially righteous." It proves that we are not righteous. Our conscience may well excuse us in many moral situations, but this does not mean that we are righteous before God. Possessing a little "island of righteousness" will land you in hell. We must be absolutely righteous to enjoy eternal life with God. There must not be any unrighteousness, in us, to be saved by the law. This is what Jesus was teaching the rich young ruler.

The *amateur Calvinist* will often downplay this universal conflict within all men. He does so by interpreting Ephesians 2:1 to mean that every lost sinner is "spiritually dead" and therefore unable to experience the conviction of sin. The amateur Calvinist does not like to admit that sinners have any ability to do the things contained in the law. One obvious problem with this view is that Scripture says we do make right moral choices; therefore, our conscience excuses us. Rom 2:14-15 Calvinists insist in sermon and in creed that natural born sinners cannot do anything right, but Scripture says we can . . . by the grace of God.

As an example, the account of the Jews who wanted to stone the woman, caught in adultery, decided not to carry out her execution after a few timely words from Jesus. I'll bet they were convicted by their conscience. They may have been "dead in trespasses and sins" but they understood the nature of sin and forgiveness. They may have been enslaved in sin but they managed to make a right moral choice. They were not believers in Christ, at this point, but their consciences were working. They were capable of doing the right thing, at least in this context. John 8

As a Calvinist, you would need to assume that these Jews must have been born again since they were obviously capable of experiencing guilt before Jesus, and demonstrating a kind of repentance. The problem, of course, is that if they were born again, by the Calvinistic definition, they would not have wanted to trap Jesus and/or execute the woman in the first place. (Note: I guess we should chalk one up for the Devil if this story does not belong in the Canon of Scripture, if you know what I mean.)

Real guilt is observed in every person without exception. Guilt is one of our most effective evangelistic and apologetic tactics to get the unbeliever to succumb to the “foolishness of the cross.” As we will see shortly, the *veteran* Calvinist admits that lost and unsaved sinners may “tremble over their actual sins.” Calvinistic theologians teach that unbelievers are enslaved in sin but they still experience all manner of guilt (except, perhaps, the guilt of eating from the tree in the Garden). They acknowledge that which is observed in every person, in every culture. Everyone experiences the inner moral conflict of right and wrong. This universal sense of moral duty is evidence for the existence of God. It draws us to God. This universal sense of guilt is what makes the cross so attractive . . . to the contrite.

7.3 MATTHEW HENRY ON ROMANS 5

Matthew Henry was a Calvinistic Puritan. His commentary on the Bible is a goldmine, but the dross of his Calvinism can be hard to miss. He makes this dubious statement in his explanation of original sin in his comments on Romans 5,

Then entered the guilt of Adam’s sin imputed to posterity, and a general corruption and depravedness of nature.³

As we have just seen, Romans 5 does not actually say that. It is Matthew Henry’s interpretation of Romans 5. It would be a grievous injustice, if not madness, to impute guilt to people before they are old enough to have a conscious sinful thought. Again, Romans 4:15 says, “. . . where there is no law there is no transgression”, and in Romans 5:13 we see that “sin is *not* imputed when there is no law.” How can someone who does not yet exist be held accountable for obedience to any law? They

wouldn't have a mind yet, let alone a conscience. The unborn can have no conscious concept of any moral law. I'm no expert in philosophy, but I don't think you can "be" corrupt if you don't have any "being." How could the law of God have any jurisdiction in the world of an embryo, fetus, or infant? We know that "by the law is the knowledge of sin." Paul said that he would not have known sin except through the law. Rom 3:20; 7:7

Matthew Henry is echoing the Westminster Confession. They are teaching that infants are guilty of sin before they can have any knowledge of sin. They have it backwards. To repeat, we will see from Romans 9 that men don't start sinning until *after* they are born. (Do we really need to be told that? This could not come as a surprise to anyone except a stubborn Calvinist. One does not need to be brilliant to see the absurdity of their conclusion, but one would have to be pretty bright to defend it.)

Where is the rule that says God would be unjust to permit every person to suffer the *temporal consequences* of Adam's sin? God's judgment on Adam's sin may guarantee physical death to his descendants, but the condemnation of eternal hell is escapable for every sinner . . . thanks to the justice and grace of God.

Adam's sin inevitably affects the way we are made. It does not inevitably affect anyone's eternal destiny. This is a big difference.

The Calvinist is teaching that Adam's descendants are guilty of breaking a law before they existed. It would be a law, which they did not know about and they had no ability to obey. By this bizarre reasoning, we should assume that God could have "justly" punished Adam and Eve for eating of the tree *before* they ate of the tree. In addition, God could have "justly" punished Adam and Eve for eating from the tree *without* telling them not to. They must also assume that it would be fair if God sent Adam to hell for his disobedience even if he had no ability to resist eating from the tree. As absurd as all this sounds, it is exactly what Calvinism does when it imputes the guilt of Adam's sin to every person born into Adam's race.

Similarly, it is no more reasonable to teach that God holds Adam's descendants eternally accountable for the *inevitable effects* of Adam's

sin . . . in which they played no role. (I note this distinction, again, to acknowledge the “kinder and gentler” brand of Calvinist who only insists that we could suffer *eternal hell* as the inevitable consequence of sins that we could not prevent. I am happy to note, again, that some Calvinists object to the traditional Reformed teaching, which directly imputes the guilt of Adam’s sin to our account. I guess we should be glad for any movement in the right direction, even if it is small and perfunctory. See Calvin’s Institutes 2.1.8.)

Instead, we all understand that God was certainly just in holding Adam and Eve accountable for the sin because they knew the tree was off limits. They did actually eat from it in spite of the natural ability to resist. Eve acknowledged her understanding of the law right before she broke it. Gen 3:2-3 God’s temporal punishment (or condemnation) on Adam will affect the rest of us, *consequentially*. It should not be assumed that we were actually guilty of his sin. As noted before, we see this happening in every generation all over the world. Children suffer as the result of their parents’ sins, but this does not mean they are guilty of their parent’s sins.

God would be under no obligation to re-create every person in the same pure way that He made Adam and Eve before the fall. He can (and will) judge each one of us fairly. He knows the circumstances of every sinful thought, word, and deed. Cain, Abel, and the rest of us will be judged by the law, which is written on *our* hearts, and learned from Scripture. We will not be judged by the law that was given only to Adam in the garden. **It is biblically impossible that the guilt of Adam’s sin could be imputed to his descendants. Romans 5:13; 4:15.**

More quotes are needed on this issue. It is vital to understanding Calvinism. Matthew Henry also says the following in his commentary on Romans 5:

It is a great proof of original sin that little children, who were never guilty of any *actual* transgression, are yet liable to very terrible diseases, casualties, and deaths, which could by no means be reconciled with the justice and righteousness of God if they were not chargeable with *guilt*.⁴

Wow. I hope you see what he is saying. Matthew Henry is saying that those born with diseases and handicaps must be to blame for it. He is saying that it would not be just of God to allow a child to be born with

a birth defect unless they were guilty of sin *before* they were born . . . or conceived. Again, I hope you can see why this book began with the illustration of a newborn baby. This is not merely an emotional issue. It is also a rational issue.

Here we see that Matthew Henry seems to agree with everyone else when it comes to one basic principle of justice. **He acknowledges that it would not be just of God to punish someone for that which they did not (or could not) do.** That would be gross injustice. A wicked king, like Pharaoh, might punish someone for failing to complete that which is impossible, but not the LORD God. Ex 5:7-16 Matthew Henry's strange departure from justice is that he supposes God would be righteous if He holds someone eternally accountable for the inevitable effects of a sin they could not prevent and did not actually commit. Instead of teaching that it is just of God to permit the sin of Adam to *affect* the rest of us, they conjure up this mystical and mythical distinction, which charges Adam's descendants with the guilt of Adam's sin. I think Matthew Henry is mistaken.

Now, it would be just (or fair) for God to allow the *temporal* consequences of Adam's sin to affect everyone born after him. God is under no obligation to create everyone as He did Adam, in order to judge them fairly. This is especially true if God devised a plan whereby everyone affected by Adam's sin can be justly delivered from it. He, of course, did make such a plan.

. . . God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them . . . 2 Cor 5:19

Jesus is the

"Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." John 1:29

In John 9, we read where Jesus encountered a man born blind. He told the disciples that the man was not born blind because of his sin. He also said that it was not the result of his parents' sin. This would have been a great opportunity for Jesus to explain that it was the "man's sin in Adam" that caused him to be born blind. But Jesus did not offer that explanation. It doesn't sound like Jesus viewed the man as guilty of any sin, before he was born blind. No big surprise there.

Where does it say that God is obliged, by His righteousness, to determine that every child of Adam should be born healthy, and completely protected from disease, crime, and accident? Where is it written that we must all be born exactly the same to receive a just judgment before God? Remember, God is not directly responsible for the offense that led to the world's infection with sin. Adam was. How can guilt come before the crime? Worse yet, how can guilt come without a crime? The man himself had done no sin before he was born blind.

Matthew Henry's reasoning might be more plausible if this earthly life is all there is to human existence. It is not, and this kind of reasoning exposes a woefully earthbound view of divine justice. Sometimes good Christians get caught thinking like agnostics. Perfect justice is not to be expected under the sun, in this cursed world. That is a major point behind the gospel. We are to seek first the kingdom of God and set our affections on things above. If our hope is in Christ in this life only, then we are of all people most to be pitied. Mt: 6:33; Col 3:1; 1 Cor 15:19 Any person who expects perfect justice to be accomplished in this life will die disappointed. The death of an infant is not the end but will be the beginning of a glorious life with his/her Creator.

Like Peter, when he tried to keep Jesus from the cross, and the "natural man" in 1 Corinthians 2:14, Matthew Henry is speaking as if this life is all there is to our existence. That is a fundamental mistake. How is it that a Calvinistic Puritan, like Matthew Henry, cannot see a clear application of the point made in Romans 9?

... Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, why have you made me like this? 21 Does not the Potter have power over the clay to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? Rom 9:20-21

We will visit this again in Chapter 9, but how in the world can a Calvinist maintain that it is just for God to ordain Esau to *eternal damnation* before he was born, but somehow unjust of God to ordain that a child be born with some kind of miserable affliction or suffer from an accident or crime? This is a sizeable contradiction. This is especially puzzling in light of the things that Jesus said about children. He spoke of their faith and their place in the kingdom. Mt 18:2-4; 19:13-15; 21:16 Esau was a child once. All the sons of Adam were

children once, and Jesus' gracious words regarding children applied to us all . . . even with our original sin natures. **Why would Jesus use the faith of children as an example of saving faith if they are born “spiritually dead” and naturally incapable of faith?** (When I was a Calvinist, I could not adequately answer this question.)

Again, it is more reasonable and biblical to teach that children are born sinners but they also are born in a state of grace. We know that children are capable of humble faith. Jesus told us as much. I have yet to hear a more plausible explanation of what Paul meant when he said that he was alive once without the law. According to Paul's own testimony, the period of his childhood could have been the only time in his life when he was “without the law.” Rom 7:9 This is a principle of God's judgment. Children remain in a state of grace until they sin willfully, against their knowledge of the law, and in spite of God's common grace. God will know when it is just to impute the guilt of their sins to their own account. We may not.

7.4 WHO IS TO BLESS AND WHO IS TO BLAME?

Don't weep too long for the children who, throughout history, have suffered and died because of someone else's sin or mistake. Everyone will die as a result of someone else's sin (that is Adam's), but no one must go to hell for it. God's righteous judgment will prevail and the last shall be first. Weep for the men and women who lived long enough to know right from wrong and chose the wrong because it was more fun to “laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints”. They preferred the pleasures of sin over the deep and abiding joy of walking in the Spirit. Weep for the covetous who put the almighty dollar ahead of the Almighty God. Weep for those who hardened their hearts and resisted the universal urgings of the Spirit of God to repent in true contrition. Weep for the self-righteous who thought they did not need a Savior to be sacrificed on a gruesome Roman cross. Weep for the one who thought he could blame God, Adam, or his family for *all* of his own sins, which he committed in spite of God's common grace. We may weep for them as Jesus wept for Jerusalem. Luke 19:41

We are experts at making excuses. (“The woman You gave me . . .” “I couldn't help it”. “I was raised that way”. “I have a genetic

predisposition so it's not my fault". "Boys will be boys". "Mom always said if you've got it . . . flaunt it". "I prayed for help but it never came". "My parents didn't want me." "I was abused as a child". "Nobody's perfect." "I'm not that bad".) God will know what to hold each one of us accountable for, and it may be more than we want to admit.

It must be re-stated that Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 do not say that Adam's *guilt is imputed* to his descendants.

You don't have to be "totally depraved" or even "radically corrupt," as defined by Calvinists, to deserve separation from a holy God. You only need to commit one sin in which God imputes its guilt to your account. James 2:10 This is all it took for Adam. He "died" on the day of his first sin. If we sin once, we fall short of the glory of God. One sin is total depravity compared to the perfect righteousness of God. Once we have "actually" sinned against the light of conscience, and in spite of the ability to prevent it, then we are culpable before God. We will need a Savior. Even John the Baptist needed a Savior. Mt 3:14;11:11 Even Mary the "blessed" and "virgin" mother of Jesus, called God her Savior. Luke 1:47 The most godly man or woman you have ever known needed a Savior. God be thanked . . . we all got one; His name is above every name.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them . . . 2 Cor. 5:19

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 1 Cor. 15:22

But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. Rom 5:15

7.5 THE BIBLE DOES NOT TEACH UNIVERSALISM

We need not confuse this with the Universalist who claims that unbelievers will inevitably be saved by Christ's sacrifice. You must be old enough to understand the truth before you can reject it and actually be accounted as an unbeliever. We have far too much revelation,

which plainly teaches that *there is a condition* for salvation in Christ. The condition, of course, is faith. It is penitent faith, which is the kind of faith you can't brag about. Every sinner who can recognize the law written on his or her heart will be culpable before God. There is no clearer teaching in the entire Bible than the absolute necessity of humble faith as the condition for saving grace.

God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Hab 2:4; Is 57:15; 66:1-2; Mt 18:3-4; Luke 14:7-14; James 1:21; 4:10; 1 Pet 5:5-6; 1 John 1:9

We are expected to have the kind of faith that was demonstrated by the Gentile woman who acknowledged that she was a “dog”, and the Roman Centurion who said he was not worthy to have Jesus in his home. Mt 15:26-28; Luke 7:6 We need the contrite spirit of the tax collector who would not even look up when asking for mercy. Luke 18:13 No one could be truly proud of genuine humility. These demonstrations of humble faith are not works of righteousness.

(This, by the way, is the reason that the secular views of sin are so dangerous. Modern teachings that attempt to remove all shame and guilt strike at the very heart of saving faith. The growing “scientific” theory that adults should not be held accountable for any sin is utterly incompatible with the Scriptures. Woe to any society that buys into this flimsy excuse disguised as modern science. The world will be a worse train wreck if these views ever really take hold. This denies the common grace of God and the universal working of conscience. The Church must not be duped, or intimidated, into accepting the world’s view of sin, guilt, and shame. The truth only hurts when it should.)

This understanding of grace does not remove the importance of evangelism and missions. It is a tragedy when someone lives and dies without hearing about the Light of the world. The Church must remain committed to the “Great Commission.” God has now revealed Himself to us, most fully, through His Son. Everyone should hear about Jesus. He is the express image of God. All the fullness of the Godhead was in the man Christ Jesus. He is the Way, Truth, and Life. No one can come to the Father through any other means. Those of us who know and love the gospel should be quick to spread the good news . . . even if we were not commanded to.

7.6 CALVINISTIC ORIGINAL SIN HAS BEEN A COSTLY ERROR

The two sides are not saying the same thing in different ways regarding the fall of man. The Calvinistic view of the fall alienates people from the Bible altogether. The Westminster view forces the unjust conclusion that God holds infants guilty for something they did not do. To repeat, the notion that anyone can be subject to eternal damnation because of the inevitable effects of Adam's sin is a conclusion that cannot be defended, by evident reason or Scripture.

This error gives opportunity to the skeptics who would use this obvious injustice as a legitimate excuse for rejecting the biblical gospel altogether. This would be a valid reason why some would become "disappointed" with Christianity. Holding people guilty for a sin they didn't commit is disappointing. Sending a soul to hell as the result of sins, for which they could not even repent, is also disappointing. **It just doesn't make sense that someone should repent for the condition in which they were born. It has been said that heresy is the unpaid debt of the church. We owe it to God and the world to avoid this error.**

When we combine this error with the Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation, the whole world suffers. We shoot ourselves in the foot apologetically and evangelistically. It is tough enough to get skeptics to succumb to the Scriptures when they are accurately taught. We only make matters worse when we teach error. We may sound intellectual but thoughtful skeptics will be tempted to lump the truth claims of Christianity in with all of the false religions and worldviews that are out there. It is confusing and people will rightly dismiss this view of original sin as "obviously unfair."

I suspect also, that much of the liberalism that has plagued the church in the last two centuries is not merely due to the rejection of the supernatural, the rejection of an eternal punishment, and our need for a substitutionary atonement. I wouldn't be surprised if some of the Neo-Orthodoxy of the past and the Neo Neo Orthodoxy of today is caused by an over-reaction to the Calvinistic view of original sin. We certainly must not abandon all the teachings of the Reformers and Puritans, but we must fix this error. When shepherds make mistakes it can really hurt the sheep.

The correct biblical teaching actually leaves men with no excuse for their own willful sin. The Calvinistic teaching enables every person to

blame Adam for each and every one his sins. Therefore, we could justly protest against any judgment against them. Skeptics will reasonably claim that Adam's irresistible influence is the direct cause of every sin therefore, they should not be held accountable. The proper biblical view of original sin, combined with the proper biblical view of the common grace of God, provides a sound and reasonable answer to the problem of evil and every man's guilt before God. The Calvinistic view does not.

Matthew Henry has one line in his commentary on Romans 5 that all believers can wholeheartedly agree with. He is quoting a man, who after observing the change in his own appearance after being quite sick, lamented:

O Adam what hast thou done?⁵

Indeed, the mirror is no long-term friend to those afflicted with original sin. Death is constantly tightening its insidious grip on even the godliest of believers. The signs of aging are painfully obvious in us all. But even the ravages of old age serve a wonderful purpose as they ruthlessly tear away at our pride. The humiliation of growing old is a good thing because God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. If it takes the humiliation of gray hair, wrinkles, age spots, brittle bones, memory loss, false teeth, walkers, wheelchairs, and big diapers to put us in our place before God, then bring it on. It sure beats dying in our sinful pride. It leaves some room for hope.

7.7 GEORGE WHITEFIELD ON ORIGINAL SIN

It is imperative that we have a clear understanding of what is at stake in interpreting Romans 5, and what it means to be "in Adam." George Whitefield was a famous Puritan preacher who was powerfully used to spread the gospel in the 18th century. He made the following statements regarding original sin in his sermon entitled, The Method of Grace:

You may be convinced of your *actual* sins so as to be made to tremble and yet you may be strangers to Jesus Christ. You may have no true work of grace upon your hearts.

The poor creature [mankind] is made to live down at the foot of the throne of God and to acknowledge that God would be just to damn him, just to cut him off though he never had committed one actual sin in his life. Did you ever feel and experience this, any of you? To justify God in our damnation? To own that you are by nature children of wrath **and that God may justly cut you off though you never had actually offended Him in all your life?**

If you have never felt the weight of original sin do not call yourselves Christians

I am verily persuaded that original sin is the greatest burden of a true convert.⁶

Whoa Nellie! That is some “big boy” Calvinism. As noted before, Mr. Whitefield may be using hyperbole to cover a weak spot in his systematic theology. (Or perhaps, he was genuinely convinced of the necessity of this apparent absurdity.) The Reformed system inevitably takes us here. I am somewhat grateful for Mr. Whitefield’s comments insofar as he is one of the few who has the boldness to be so upfront with this pillar of Calvinistic inference. **I don’t think God appreciates preachers telling people that He would send them to hell even if they never actually sinned.** It doesn’t reflect very well on the character of God, but at least Whitefield had the courage to admit that this tenuous distinction is what he believes. The modern “Calvinist” does not possess this much nerve. You don’t hear many Calvinistic pastors telling their congregations that God would send them to hell even if they never actually sinned once. (And we should be glad about that.)

Note first, that Whitefield is admitting that lost sinners who are “dead in trespasses and sins” are quite capable of trembling over their sins. They have the spiritual sense to know that they are sinners. They would not be spiritually incoherent or constantly railing against God. Whitefield is admitting that the lost are capable of fearing God and recognizing spiritual issues *without being born again*. But he is also saying that trembling over the sins we have committed is *not enough* to be forgiven and saved. We must tremble over a sin, which the Bible says, we did not commit. A basic understanding of justice would say

otherwise. We certainly don't raise our kids, or run our businesses, under this twisted kind of "justice." When we punish our children, we have "actual" reasons for it. (We should anyway.) Sometimes the mistake of one employee will affect the other employees, but we don't terminate one employee for something another employee did wrong. In everyday life when we punish someone who has done nothing wrong, it is shameful. It is not considered honorable, let alone divine.

We see, again, that when you strip it down to the bare essentials, the essence of repentance in the Calvinistic system is irresistibly admitting that you are at fault for being born a sinner.

For all the typical Calvinistic hyperbole and rhetoric about spiritually dead people not being able to do anything spiritual, or understand the things of God, they really believe that the unregenerate can do most anything that the regenerate can do. It seems there are two things that the reprobate cannot do in the Calvinistic system. One is accept the blame for the fall of Adam and the other is to embrace the cross. It would not be enough to tremble over the sins that you have actually committed because you will be damned for failing to confess a sin that you didn't actually commit. Thus, Whitefield urges us to confess it.

This is the conviction that separates the sheep from the goats for those who really grasp the Calvinistic system. They must teach this level of injustice to maintain some semblance of justice in their system. Their view of unconditional election and irresistible reprobation has backed them into this corner. It may be the most logical way out. As we will soon see, most Calvinists need a reason to say that Jacob's election was not conditional but Esau's reprobation was conditional. The best they can do is claim that Esau was somehow guilty of eating from the tree in the Garden.

I do think all true believers will say that they have felt the weight and burden of original sin. I just don't know if we have felt personally *responsible* for being born with it. I don't think sincere Christians want to deny the burden of original sin. True Christians feel the responsibility to *contain and resist* our natural inward corruption. The sin nature within us is painfully obvious but we don't need to pretend that we are to blame for having it. We will be to blame for not *suppressing* it. It is innate within the penitent heart to acknowledge that temptation comes

from *within*, as well as from without. It is also biblical. Mt. 15:19, James 4:1 But if we are honest, then we would also acknowledge that we are not inwardly forced to sin at every opportunity. Sometimes, we do the things contained in the law and our conscience excuses us. Rom 2:14-15 This occurs before we believe in Jesus . . . and after.

More importantly, we are capable of confessing our sin and believing the gospel. We are not commanded to live perfectly in order to be saved. We are told to repent. I know of no place in Scripture where it is clearly taught that “slaves to sin” cannot confess their sin and ask for mercy. An actual slave can still *desire* to be free. **The Bible never defines “dead in trespasses and sins” as unable to repent or believe the truth. This is another pillar of inference in the Calvinistic system.**

There is also within each of our souls the force of conscience, which enables us to resist temptation, regardless of whether it comes from within or without. We prove every day that we do not *have to* sin at every opportunity. I expect that God will remind us of any success we may have had against temptation as a good reason for holding us accountable at the final judgment. As an example, it would be very difficult to prove that you *had to* rob a bank, one day, if you had been able to resist robbing banks every other day of your life. So it will be with a myriad of other sins, including unbelief.

The fall of Adam has made it impossible for anyone to live a sinless life, but it has not made it impossible to be contrite and trust the invisible attributes of God. The common grace of God makes repentance and faith possible for every sinner. “Boasting is excluded by the law of faith.” Rom 3:27

7.8 ARE YOU TO BLAME FOR ADAM’S SIN?

Whitefield’s words give us insight into the Calvinistic understanding of saving faith. They teach that an essential ingredient of saving faith is godly sorrow over *our alleged guilt* for the sin of Adam. Whitefield essentially said that unbelievers could tremble over their actual sins, but only the elect will tremble over “their” sin in Adam. Taking personal responsibility for the sin of Adam, and its inevitable consequences, would be a kind of Calvinistic “shibboleth” test of salvation. (I would

be inclined to agree that it would take a supernatural event to convince someone of something so irrational.)

The Bible goes to great lengths to name and define the sins for which God holds us accountable. All forms of idolatry, dishonesty, adultery, stealing, covetousness, and the malice of heart which is behind them all, are clear in Scripture. Yet there is no mention of confessing our sin in Adam. No example exists in Scripture where someone finds salvation by confessing their sin of eating of the tree in the Garden of Eden. But this is the very essence of saving faith according to George Whitefield and *true* historical Calvinists.

In 1 John, the apostle does not teach that such an understanding of original sin is an essential ingredient to a joyful assurance. 1 John was written to believers so that we might be sure of our salvation. 1 John 5:13 Peter does not speak this specifically to original sin. Even James, who was not one to mince words, did not speak about the necessity of taking blame for the fall. We find nowhere in the gospels where Jesus was this specific about our relationship to Adam.

Paul says explicitly in Romans 5:12 "... through *one* man sin entered the world." In spite of this, Mr. Whitefield is laying out the Calvinistic view of "race sin" or universal culpability for the fall. He sets it forth as a condition of assurance (if not a condition of salvation itself). This is a core distinction of historical Calvinism.

Whitefield is saying that we should not call ourselves Christians if we do not agree with his understanding of original sin. I disagree, but I will say this . . . do not call yourself a historical Calvinist if you do not agree with Mr. Whitefield's understanding of original sin. **There are a lot of Christians running around today, calling themselves Calvinists, who don't understand (or divulge) the full implications of what they are claiming.** Whitefield's view is historic Calvinism, and it is one of the reasons that I am saying Calvinism is, essentially, hyper-Calvinism with a more palatable presentation. If you do not agree that you are personally accountable for having been born with your sinful nature, then you are not truly Reformed. This is a hinge on which their whole system swings. They say you were born with the corruption of original sin and it is your fault. You could be held eternally accountable for the inevitable consequences of *Adam's* sin.

In the historical Reformed system, if a baby dies two hours after being born, the infant will lay before God as worthy of eternal damnation based upon the fall of Adam. The baby would not only suffer the temporal consequences of Adam's sin, but he/she would be essentially culpable for it. If that soul was not selected for forgiveness . . . well . . . sorry about that. The infant would somehow, deserve the full fury of God's wrath because Adam sinned in the Garden. Therefore, some historical Calvinists would logically teach that the dying infant is off to the fire forever. The infant was not "effectually called unto faith in Christ" therefore he/she must not be elect.

This doctrine may sound absurd but the options only get worse for the Calvinist. This may not seem to be fair but it sounds better than plainly admitting that the LORD God punishes the innocent. That would be ascribing to God a heinous sin. Prov 1:11; 6:17

Take a deep breath and let the impact of Whitefield's words sink in. I know what many of you are thinking: "That can't possibly be right. How could someone who had never actually sinned . . . be damned?" Even if you are a professing Calvinist, you have probably swallowed hard, shifted in your chair, and are headed to your bookshelves to make sure that is what you are supposed to believe.

7.9 HOW IS SIN IMPUTED?

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? Gen 18:25 Even as sinners, we all possess a basic understanding of right and wrong. It stands to reason that the Creator of heaven and earth would be the best Arbiter of all righteousness. Here we see that our debate over election includes understanding how God imputes the guilt of our sin.

To repeat yet again, historical Calvinists claim that God imputes the guilt of Adam's sin to every person, and/or leaves the reprobate to suffer the inevitable (and eternal) effects of Adam's sin. Our non-Calvinist believes that the actual guilt of Adam's sin could only be imputed to Adam himself, but the consequences of God's curse on his sin affect every person. They are not saying the same thing. God is sovereign over the imputation of guilt and we know that He imputes guilt when His law is deliberately broken. He does not impute guilt where there is no law.

Long before Moses brought the 10 Commandments down from the mountain all people had a sense of right and wrong. Also, those who never hear the 10 commandments still have a sense of right and wrong. We see many examples of this. Cain's reaction to God's inquisitions regarding his offering, and the murder of his brother, both prove that he knew he was guilty. We see a pagan king who had the moral sense to know that it would be wrong to take another man's wife. There are other examples in Scripture of Gentiles who were under the influence of God's common grace. They feared the just wrath of God. They recognized the invisible attributes of God through the things that are made. They were sinners with a functioning conscience, which both accused and excused them. Yet, they had no conscious faith in Jesus.

The definitions of sin, righteousness, and justice are not changed by the coming of Christ. Our basic understanding of the moral law remains intact after we become followers of Jesus. We become much more acutely aware of our own iniquity when it is examined under the light of Scripture, but the righteousness of God does not change. It is immutable. **When there is no actual sin, there is no guilt.** (Do we really need to be told this?)

Many sins and false doctrines are self evident, even to the lost. No one naturally believes that God is a cow or a tree. No one naturally thinks that adultery, lying and stealing are virtues. God has written these laws on our hearts and we each will "by *nature* do the things in the law." Rom 2:14 We don't keep the law fully, as sin is bound up in our heart from birth. Prov 22:15 We are each born with a fallen nature which idolizes the self and craves sin. But God gives each of us His common grace in order to combat the effects of our natural corruption.

This natural ability to do the things in the law is in constant conflict with our natural inclination to sin. We each possess two natural influences, or laws, that conflict with one another. That which is naturally in us, by virtue of being made in God's image, is constantly battling with that which is in us by virtue of Adam's fall. They are not necessarily equal in their influence, but God will make a perfect judgment of every moral decision we ever make. He does so before we come to faith in Christ and after. This is how God wants life to be . . . for now.

Sometimes it is impossible for us to know where the appropriate blame is to be placed in a given act of sin. Sometimes it is easy and

we need not look beyond the mirror. In Romans 7, Paul shares his own inner struggles with sin even after coming to faith in Christ. It is very evident that the “old heart” is not completely removed in every believer. It is never too difficult for God to know who is to bless and who is to blame. He sees all the circumstances and motives. He will get it right . . . and this is why we need Jesus.

Before we have faith in Christ, or read the Bible, we already know that lying and stealing are bad things. We even know that liars and thieves should be subject to some kind of judgment. Becoming a Christian does not change that. In fact, it is the correct *spiritual* understanding of these sins that is instrumental in bringing us to the conviction that we need a Savior. Rom 7; Gal 3

As an unbeliever, you may have even understood that lust and hatred, in the heart, were essentially sins of adultery and murder. Mt. 5 (As proof, some of us may remember the irreverent and foul-mouthed comedian, George Carlin. George had a stand up routine on this very subject. He understood the nature of sin and he joked about it.) If we are genuine and spirit led believers we will have greater motivation and increasing ability to turn from sinful actions, but we knew they were wrong before we had any conscious faith in Christ.

Jesus’ prayer from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do” gives us some important biblical insight on how to understand God’s imputation of sin. Luke 23:34 We see, from His prayer, that ignorance can be a just reason for mercy. Jesus did not ask the Father to ignore their sin. He did not suggest that their actions were not wrong. His request was for a just mercy based on their ignorance of Who He was, and what He was doing on the cross. Jesus was on the cross so that God could justly forgive virtually all sin. It is not perfectly clear for whom Jesus was interceding in this prayer. If He was praying for the Jews, who wanted Him crucified, then we can see that the blinding spirit of stupor could have been a blessing in disguise.

The Old Testament instructions regarding those who accidentally killed someone also serve to confirm a basic principle of justice. We don’t punish accidents in the same way that we punish malicious criminal acts. God did not instruct Moses to apply the same level of responsibility, or punishment, for unintentional sins and freak accidents, as he did for deliberate sins. Lev 4:27; Dt 19:5

The point here is that basic justice is universally understood and Calvinism undermines the basic principles of justice. Yes, there are situations that can be morally complex. Gray areas exist, and it can be perplexing to try and sort out who is to blame in some extraordinary cases. But we can trust these unique situations to the wisdom of an all seeing God. We can press on with our basic understanding of guilt: “If you do the crime . . . you deserve the time.”

7.10 COULD WE PERISH FOR FAILING TO KEEP AN IMPOSSIBLE STANDARD?

Again, one big question in all of this is whether God expects us to do that which we have no ability to do, under the threat of eternal damnation. This is an important question in our study (although many would wonder why). Most of us would agree that the simple answer is “no”. But Calvinists teach that the reprobate will be damned for failing to prevent Adam’s sin in the Garden, even though it was impossible for them to prevent it. Remember, our actual sins are irrelevant to those who ascribe to the imputation of Adam’s guilt to the entire human race. We are born guilty of sin . . . in their system.

It is unthinkable to the average believer that God would send anyone to hell for failing to keep an impossible command. Non-Calvinists teach that God has provided a way of escape for everyone who has broken His law in ignorance, in weakness, accidentally, and deliberately. It is the way of the cross. It is justification by faith. It is a wonderful gift; especially for those of us who have deliberately sinned in spite of the ability to resist.

It seems that in the Calvinistic view of justice it would have been fair for God to punish Adam with physical death (and eternal death) even if He had not given him the ability to resist eating from the forbidden tree. Most of us would disagree and I don’t think it is our Pelagian pride.

Surely, you have wondered how it could be just for God to expect us to keep every commandment, perfectly, if we are born with a corrupt nature, which guarantees that we will sin and fall short of His glory. This seems unfair . . . and it would be. We do not find fault with a two year old for failing to understand the Bible, but we would find fault with a parent who expects a two year old to understand the Bible. We

would be infuriated by a parent who punishes a two year old for failing to understand the Bible. This would be the essence of injustice. God is a just judge. He does not hold us eternally accountable for that which we cannot do . . . by His grace. God does set the bar of obedience very high, but failure to clear that bar will not inevitably be punished with eternal condemnation. We can all be glad that our failure to be holy, as God is holy, does not guarantee eternal punishment. Everyone who will be enjoying God in heaven will have failed to be holy as God is holy, both before coming to Christ and after.

This leads to a very important point in our study. We need to be reminded that no one, born in sin, is ever commanded to keep the law perfectly in order to be eternally saved. That would be salvation through the law. We are commanded to confess our sin, repent of it, and trust the mercy of God as it is now found in the gospel. This we can do by the common grace of God. God does not leave anyone without some grace to combat the effects of Adam's influence on us. This grace is sufficient for penitent faith. It is not sufficient to keep the law perfectly. Rom 1, 2;

The common grace of God is not sufficient to understand the deep things of the Spirit of God but it is enough to see our sin and turn from it. 1 Cor 2: 6-14 (We will eventually see that God may withdraw this common grace from those who repeatedly spurn it, and that is when the way of the unfaithful gets hard. Very hard. Prov 13:15 The wicked don't always prosper. Many of them get addicted, injured, killed, or spend a long time in prison.)

We are not expected to live perfectly in order to be saved any more than we are commanded to walk on water, fly like a bird, end world hunger, or stop every abortion in order to be saved. We have not been given the grace to do these things, but we have been given the grace to repent of our sin and believe the truth. We are still expected to strive for perfection as our ultimate goal. This is the essence of repentance. It is the most blessed way to live.

Indeed, we are commanded to be holy as God is holy. 1 Pet 1:16; Lev 11:44-45 That is a glorious goal but it is impossible, even for Spirit filled believers. Gladly, no one will be sent to hell for actually failing to keep that lofty and glorious standard. We will each die, physically, for failing to meet that standard, but no one will perish in hell because of Adam's irresistible influence on us. We will perish for our own suppression

of the truth, which is now best demonstrated by our rejection of The Truth . . . that is Jesus. There is a difference between the pursuit of holiness in order to please God, and the pursuit of holiness as a way to be saved. The difference is in the spirit and it is a very big difference. God has known all along that no one, born in sin, will keep His law perfectly. Everyone who goes to heaven will have broken His law. Our failure to keep the law will be covered by the blood of Christ, if we are contrite and turn from our transgressions.

7.11 ACTUAL SINS?

Whitefield's comments brought one question to my mind right away. How can you sin without actually sinning? It is a mysterious distinction at best. It is not an inference that we should be building our entire soteriology upon. If a sin is not an *actual* sin then what kind of sin is it? Imagined? Assumed? Potential? I have no idea how a sin cannot be an actual sin. Jesus was clear that if we lust in our hearts then we have sinned. Thus, the very desire to sin is a sin. Mt 5:27-28 I freely admit that I did not finish college, but it is silly to think that someone can be guilty of a sin which they did not *actually* commit. The very idea contradicts the definition of sin. What law did *we* knowingly break, or fail to keep, in being born sinners? Perhaps one needs seminary to understand such a nuanced and sophisticated view of justice . . . or to obscure it.

This may be what the former secretary for foreign missions in the Presbyterian Church, Dr. Darby Fulton meant when he said that he had learned all of his theology by the time he was 12 years old. He said his mother made him memorize the Shorter Catechism. He said that in seminary and graduate school “he learned how to say it so no one could understand it.”⁷ (See the July 2009 Ligonier Tabletalk, Generation to Generation, by Gordon K. Reed.) This is a revealing remark, albeit somewhat tongue in cheek. At least the Presbyterian hierarchy is more subtle than the Roman Catholic leadership when it comes to keeping the sheep in a fog. They generally use less Latin.

The term “actual sin” is not a biblical term. It seems to have been created out of necessity by Calvinists who needed to defend their false assertion that we can be held responsible for the sin of Adam. When

we build our foundational doctrine on a false assumption, it will often require more error to compensate for the original mistake.

7.12 PSALM 51—CONCEIVED IN SIN

As you may know, one particular verse of Psalm 51 is always invoked in our debate. It is crucial in the defense of the Calvinistic view of the fall, as it relates to election. You may want to review the entire Psalm before we look into it. David wrote this psalm of confession after Nathan had exposed his sin in the episode with Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah. You will remember that David coveted Uriah's wife so he had him sent to the front lines of the war where he would get killed. David then took, Uriah's "widow," Bathsheba as his wife. When the sin was exposed, David fell under deep conviction. He makes a statement that is often in the middle of our debate. In verse 5, David said:

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.

Calvinists lean heavily upon this text to support the assertion that we all deserve to perish from the moment we are conceived . . . if not before. This verse is called upon to support the inference, which suggests that we are born "spiritually dead", and cannot repent until we are spiritually born again.

The Calvinist will suggest that David is saying that his sin is a direct result of Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden. Yet most Calvinists would stop short of actually saying that David's sin was inevitable. (To this, we should agree.) To most Calvinists, David is confessing his "guilt" for the circumstances of his own conception. This would have to be *inferred* from the text. David is not explicitly saying that he is to blame for being brought forth in iniquity and conceived in sin. There is no mention of Adam, or the fall of man, in this Psalm. The word "imputation" is not used.

Our non-Calvinist will agree that David is saying that he was born a sinner, but he is not admitting that it was his fault. David is not blaming his parents (or Adam) for his sins. David is clearly taking the blame for his sins regarding Bathsheba and her husband. This is godly sorrow and a sincere confession of some life changing sins. By saying that he was conceived in sin, he is merely agreeing with that which is

obvious to all parents, in every generation, and in every corner of the world: Sinning comes naturally. David is not saying that his sin was unpreventable due to his sinful nature inherited from Adam. He is not making flimsy excuses. He is pleading for mercy. We are born with a corrupt heart, which inclines us to sin. Proverbs teaches that sin is bound up in the heart of a child. Prov 22:15 This does not necessarily mean that every sin is inevitable. David had the same flesh all of his life and he managed to avoid this level of sinful meltdown prior to this point in his life.

I don't think David was trying to push the guilt for this mess off on his parents, or Adam. David is in agreement with Jesus, when He said that the things, which defile a man, come from within him. Mt 15:19 From birth, we each possess the natural inclinations to selfishness, lust, and pride. We have these sinful inclinations due to Adam's fall. We are not born basically good with the *capacity* to sin. We are born basically evil with a capacity for good. So says Jesus (as already noted) in Matthew 7:11. Adam was made "very good", yet he had the capacity to sin. He did not have a sinful nature constantly urging him to sin. Thanks to Adam, we are all born with our sinful nature. Thanks to the common grace of God, we all have the capacity to resist our sinful nature and repent when we do yield to temptation. God knows what He can expect from each one of us. This is why we need a Savior.

We should recognize that the Bible does not teach that anyone born in sin cannot repent and embrace the mercy of God. Even if the Calvinist could prove that David was confessing "his sin in Adam" here, he still must prove that David needed to be born again before he could have done so. There is absolutely nothing in the vast biblical record of David's life, which explains *when* he was born again. (In fact, there is no place in the entire Bible, where it is revealed when anyone was born again.) Psalm 51 does not make the case for the Calvinist without reading into the text that which is not there.

R.C. Sproul has explained the Calvinistic view in his teaching series on Psalm 51. He said that because of the sin, which King David committed, in Adam, his sin nature was "already there in the fertilized egg." I can certainly relate to that, as I know sinning has come quite naturally for me, and I have committed some sins that seemed virtually involuntary. But Calvinism has us all guilty and culpable for hell *before*

we were even a fertilized egg. R.C. said of himself, in the same CD series,

I fell in Adam.⁸

R. C. would have us believe that David was confessing *his guilt* for the circumstances of his own conception. This is an example of the kind of *inference* that I've been talking about throughout the study. Without these key assumptions, the Calvinistic soteriology sputters to a halt.

It is clear, both biblically and by observation, that we are born sinners. It is not clear that it is our fault.

Hopefully, we can agree that David is not blaming his parents for being conceived in sin. However, the Calvinist, because he tinkers with the definition of justice, may actually have some trouble with this. He might be inclined to think that David *is* blaming his parents. The reason most people would say that David is not blaming his parents is because they *could not have prevented* conceiving him in sin. It was out of their control, therefore they could not be held responsible. Remember though, Calvinists believe that the damnation of the reprobate is just even though they could not prevent falling in Adam. They would have never seen the invisible attributes of God in the creation and they will have no ability to repent. If Cain and Esau were guilty of sins, which they could not prevent then why would we say that David and his parents couldn't be guilty of a sin, which they could not prevent? If God would be just in imputing Adam's sin to Esau then He would be just in imputing David's parents' sin to him. This confusion is only a problem for the committed Calvinist.

Again, we will look more into the life of Esau in Chapter 9. If Esau is damned to hell it won't be because he "fell in Adam" and was not chosen to be a believer. If he perishes, it will be because he failed to repent of his own sin and trust God's mercy, in spite of the ability to do so. We know that when we do commit a sin, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin . . . if we confess it . . . like David did here.

1 John 1:9

Scripture does not explicitly explain why David is pointing to his conception in sin in this confession. Many sinners have tried to

minimize their guilt with the argument, “I am only human.” By citing his conception in sin, David may be hoping that God would consider it as a mitigating factor in the degree of his punishment, but he is not necessarily saying that his sin was unpreventable. **We know that Adam was not brought forth in iniquity and he still managed to sin.**

I don’t believe David is trying to push the blame for his sin off on his parents . . . or Adam. He feels responsible for the sin because he is responsible. He committed some very big sins and now he seeks to be released from the churning nausea of his guilt. He desires to be restored in his relationship to God and his usefulness in God’s kingdom. Thanks to Jesus, our relationship with Adam does not disqualify us from usefulness as salt and light in a dark world. We see, in this episode, that it is our “actual” sin, which ruins our testimony and smears God’s name among the world.

Even our secret sins spoil our joy and hinder our worship. Secret sins will diminish the power of our testimony and ministry. Other people can often sense the hypocrisy. Every penitent sinner can relate to David in this psalm. This is the kind of “godly sorrow”, which leads to salvation. 2 Cor 7:10 David is working out his salvation with fear and trembling. Phil 2:12 This is a constant in the life of the true believer. **Godly sorrow is not merely done once at an altar call. It is a lifestyle. The bigger and more frequent our sins . . . the more fear and trembling it causes in our lives, and the sincerity of our faith comes into question.**

There is a second problem for the Calvinist (and many non-Calvinists) in this episode of David’s life. The Calvinist must insist that David was already born again in order to experience this kind of godly sorrow over his sin. The problem, of course, is that the new birth, as described by many, should have enabled David to prevent the sin altogether. This is because the new birth supposedly brings a radical and irresistible change of heart and will. If David was already born again, by their definition of the new birth, then how could he be so overpowered by his lusts? It seems that for all the hyperbole, which often surrounds the new birth, it doesn’t necessarily bring permanent and irresistible change to our conduct. In the Calvinistic system, the new birth brings irresistible faith but not irresistible deliverance from the dead works of the flesh. As we will eventually see, this is a tenuous distinction, which affects our assurance.

We see a similar problem in the New Testament. Paul writes to the Corinthians as if they are believers, yet he reprimands them for all sorts of issues, both in conduct and creed. There was gross sexual immorality, division, and some in the church were questioning the resurrection of Christ. It is hard to imagine that anyone could be born again, by the Calvinistic definition, and doubt the resurrection of Christ. Yet Paul stops short of pronouncing them lost. Likewise, in the churches of Galatia, the new birth would not have brought an irresistible resistance to legalism.

It is time to question the Calvinistic understanding of the new birth. We will do so (at some length) in Chapters 11 and 13. For now, we may conclude that if the new birth occurs in this life then it surely does not deterministically cause the regenerate to always do, or believe, the right thing. Whatever it means to be born again, it surely does not mean that believers are incapable of sinning big, or swerving into false doctrine. When we look at the lives of believers in the Old and New Testaments, we cannot possibly conclude that saving faith always results in totally sanctified conduct and sound doctrine. The believers listed in Hebrews 11 and those in the Corinthian Church would be examples. Whatever Paul meant when he said, “...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new;” he must be referring to our *position* in Christ, or he must be referring to some kind of process, as it applies to our earthly sanctification. 2 Cor 5:17 It would be hard to conclude that David was an unbeliever at this time, and it is also doubtful that this was his “salvation experience.”

This statement by David is much like the case of the blind man in John 9. You will remember that Jesus refused to put the blame for his natural blindness on the man himself, or his parents. Remember also, that Westminster Calvinists, like Matthew Henry, do blame the man for being born blind. (See the previous quote in section 7.3) Jesus said the man was born blind in order that “the works of God should be revealed in him.” John 9:3 The same thing may be said of every child of Adam that is born into sin. We have been born this way so that the works of God may be revealed in us. That is what we are here for. It is the great purpose of life.

7.13 CONFESSING A SIN WHICH YOU NEVER COMMITTED?

I know of no clear reference to Adam's fall in any conversion experience recorded in Scripture. I know of no confession of sin recorded in Scripture, which explicitly references "our sin in Adam." Nevertheless, we see in Whitefield's understanding, that confessing our guilt for Adam's fall would be absolutely essential to true conversion. It does seem strange that this alleged "essential" conviction of all true believers would be *left out* of the testimonies recorded in Scripture.

We do not read that Abel, Noah, Job, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, the Ninevites, Daniel, Peter, the Roman centurion, the publican, Zacheus, the thief on the cross, those convicted at Pentecost, Saul of Tarsus, the Ethiopian Eunuch, Cornelius, Lydia, the Philippian Jailer, Timothy, or the Ephesians confessed their guilt for Adam's sin. To be clear, we do see the theme of humble trust in these testimonies of Scripture, but we do not see anyone confessing "their sin in Adam." It never happens. David's words in Psalm 51 would be the closest that Scripture comes to supporting the Calvinistic position, and it is far from explicit. Adam is not even mentioned in the Psalm. That which may be implied in Scripture should never trump that which is clear in Scripture. It is clear that David is blaming himself for his sins. It is not clear that he is blaming "his sin in Adam." We must not minimize our own guilt by shifting the "real" blame onto Adam. **We must also be careful not to disparage the common grace of God.** We see this happening today in the defense of alcoholism, homosexuality, lying, and many other sins. We entirely blame our natural inclinations to sin, and in so doing, we indict the common grace of God as insufficient to prevent these sins . . . and repent of them.

Peter's sermon at Pentecost "cut to the heart" of the Jews who crucified Jesus, but their alleged sin in Adam is not mentioned. Jesus marveled at the humble faith of the Roman centurion. He also marveled at the self-deprecating faith of the Gentile woman who was happy to be called a "dog." Yet we do not read of their accepting responsibility for falling in Adam. Paul considered himself the chief of sinners but his testimony does not include any reference to Adam's sin. He felt that he was the chief of sinners due to his actual persecution of the Church.^{1 Tim 1:15} Paul must have felt that his sin was worse than Adam's sin. This may be humble hyperbole or he may be right. The

prodigal son was contrite over his foolishness in the far country, but there is no hint of his guilt for Adam's transgression. "I have sinned" were his words to his father.

Do Calvinists really believe that we must explain to every lost sinner, in every tongue and tribe, that they are culpable for Adam's fall before we can offer them any hope of salvation? According to the Westminster Confession, Matthew Henry, George Whitefield, and all traditional Calvinists . . . we must. Yet, where is the fall of Adam in the public preaching of the prophets, Jesus, or the Apostles? It is just not there. It sure looks like they were content to name the *actual* sins of the people to whom they preached.

We can add John Piper to the list of respected teachers who say that God imputes Adam's sin to the rest of us. In part 2 of the message entitled "Adam, Christ, and Justification" in his sermon series on Romans 5:12-21, John says,

People died even though their own individual sins against the Mosaic Law were not the reason for dying; they weren't counted. Instead, the reason all died is because all sinned in Adam. Adam's sin was imputed to them.⁹

Thankfully, all this soteriological theory is rare in the evangelism of church history, Reformed or otherwise. The evangelism, which has known the blessing of God in church history, has always included the clear message of repentance. With all due respect, to George Whitefield, we must press men to repent of their *own sins*, not somebody else's. I wonder how many Calvinists were brought to faith in Christ by their gnawing guilt over eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. (Come on brethren, we need to give up the hypothetical assumptions and get real with people.)

The point of all this is to acknowledge that we are "conceived in sin" and "made to be sinners" by Adam's fall, but the actual guilt for Adam's sin is not imputed to us because it was Adam's sin. He broke the unique law that was given to him. Some of our sin is committed as an irresistible result of Adam's transgression, but not all of it. We need not tremble over the circumstances of our original sin, which we could not prevent, but we had better tremble over our actual sins that we can prevent, especially if we don't confess them.

True Calvinists have this backwards. They would have us more concerned about Adam's sin than our actual lust, covetousness, and pride. I have little doubt that the Devil thinks it's a great diversionary tactic, but it will be our own deliberate and unconfessed sin, which will bring God's eternal wrath. We should tremble over our "actual" sins until they are sincerely confessed and forsaken. We won't be able to blame Adam for everything. We each have committed sins that we have previously shown the ability to resist. Our mouths will be stopped in the day when God judges our secrets. Rom 2:16

The penitent thief on the cross beside Jesus confessed that he deserved his capital punishment. This confession, coupled with his acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord, was enough for Jesus to assure him publicly that he would soon be in paradise. Luke 23:43 But this is not enough for George Whitefield and historical Calvinists. They require that every professing Christian must have this theoretical view of their culpability for their original sin, *before* they should call themselves Christians. I am glad for the thief on the cross because I don't think he had time to wrestle with the hypothetical question of his guilt for the sin in the Garden of Eden. There was no time to read a systematic theology book or an in depth treatise on the "will." Those books weren't available to him and he was about to die.

How do we repent of a sin we never committed? Should we resolve to never eat from the tree again? Calvinists will often say, "We are not sinners because we sin, but we sin because we *are* sinners." That used to sound quite profound to me but not so much any more. That is like saying, "I am not a golfer because I golf, but I golf because I am a golfer." Or, "She is not a mother because she bore children, but she bore children because she is a mother." It really doesn't make a lot of sense. It is kind of backwards. Adam was not defined as a sinner *until* he broke the law of God. He did not sin because he was a sinner. We are best defined by what we actually do.

I believe we can go with our "gut" understanding of guilt on this question. It is one and the same with the biblical teaching. Rom 1:32 It is reasonable that when we commit a sin, which we knew was wrong, in spite of the ability to resist, we should expect the guilt of that sin to be imputed to our account . . . unless it is imputed to Christ. It is more reasonable than assuming that someone could be sent to hell for sins that they could not prevent because of Adam's irresistible

influence. Lost sinners may be dead in sin but they still know that their sin deserves to be punished. It is easy to understand why Jesus taught us to ask for forgiveness as often as we ask for daily bread. Mt 6:12 Too many, in the church today, assume that it is not necessary to ask for forgiveness each day if they have already done it once at their so called “salvation experience.” We don’t stop sinning after we profess faith in Christ, therefore we should not stop asking God for forgiveness. Daily forgiveness is more important than our daily bread.

I think we have shown that Romans 5 is not saying what the Calvinist teaches. Calvinists must have a better case than Psalm 51 before we can reasonably accept such a bizarre notion of the imputation of guilt. We will continue to look into the extent of the impact of Adam’s sin on each of us. We will also continue to look into the impact of God’s common grace.

8.0 What Does it Mean to be “Dead in Sin?”

There are many texts of Scripture, which explain the scope and extent of mankind’s fall into sin. Both sides of our debate agree that we are not saved by committing fewer, or smaller, sins than those who perish. It doesn’t matter if we are hardened criminals or nice churchy sinners. Jesus made the same sacrifice for gossip and over eating as He did for murder, grand theft, and adultery. To be clear, some sins are worse than others, but all sin leaves us in need of a Savior. Both sides agree that any sin separates us from God. Therefore, we need Jesus to be reconciled to Him.

Our non-Calvinist says that “dead in trespasses and sins” means that God holds us guilty for our own sin. We are dead in sin when the guilt of our own sin is imputed to our own account, and Christ’s righteousness is not imputed to our account. If you are not a believer then you are dead in sin. The Calvinist believes the same thing, but he also believes that dead in sin means *incapable* of repentance and embracing God’s mercy by faith. Most historical Calvinists teach that “dead in sin” means that we are incapable of actually doing *anything* right and we cannot be contrite over our sin.

Let’s examine some of the most pertinent texts, which describe man’s sinful condition. Perhaps we can find the answer to this controversial question.

8.1 THE FALL—IN WHAT WAY DID ADAM DIE?

Let’s go to the very first sin and examine what happened. Perhaps we can get a grasp on the New Testament term “dead in trespasses and sins.” This will help us to find the biblical understanding of what it means to be “born again” or “quickened” to life in Christ.

It should be noted that there are three different words used to describe the making of the first man. These words are translated as *made*, *created*, and *formed*. (It should go without saying, that man did not create himself, or evolve from some slime, but there are those who doubt it.) Perhaps the most important point to remember is that Man was made in God’s image and likeness, and God said His creation was very good. Gen 1:26, 27, 31; 2:7

Thus, mankind got off to a good start. He was alive physically and he was alive to God in a spiritual sense. Man was in a right relationship with God. There was no enmity between Adam and his Creator. In addition, there were no problems between Adam and Eve. They were able to eat freely of the Tree of Life but they were forbidden from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Death was not part of the picture but it was certainly possible. Their bodies were not corrupt but they were capable of corruption. It certainly appears that Adam was in a position to sin . . . and . . . not sin. He was free (or at liberty, if you prefer) to trust and obey the word of God, or doubt and disobey. It seems that Adam possessed the power of contrary choice. He could love God or despise Him. If there was something in his constituent nature, which irresistibly determined that he must eat from the forbidden tree, then he was not made “very good.” This would mean that God caused, or even, *desired*, Adam to sin. We all would then have a big problem calling God good or holy. We don’t need to go there now. We saw this in our earlier discussions of the will of God in chapter 3.

God told Adam that if he eats from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil then he would die *that day*. Gen 2:17 It is not clear if Adam understood, explicitly, what the nature of this “death” would be. It is not explained in Genesis and Adam had never seen anyone die. It is possible that he had never seen a plant or animal die, but we don’t need to tackle that mystery at this time. (A juicy steak and a rotisserie chicken are two delicious proofs that demonstrate how God can work all things together for good . . . if you know what I mean.)

We are not told exactly how long the man and woman were in the garden before the fall. We don’t get the impression it was very long. Genesis tells us that the days of Adam were an amazing 930 years. Genesis 5 tells us that Seth was born, in Adam’s likeness and image, when Adam was 130. This would seem to show that the fall occurred fairly early in Adam’s life. Seth was born after Cain was old enough to kill his brother, Abel. Most of Adam’s life was lived after the Fall and his exile from the Garden.

Genesis 3 describes the account of the fall of man. We know that Adam and Eve did not drop dead physically on the same day they ate the forbidden fruit. They did eventually die physically. It is usually suggested that they died, *spiritually*, on the day in which they

ate. This death is somewhat mysterious. The biblical writers do not use the term “spiritually dead” anywhere in Scripture. It is something of an oxymoron. It would be like speaking of a breathing corpse. It is evident that Adam and Eve’s amicable relationship with God died that day. It was destroyed by their sin.

In two of his New Testament epistles, Paul describes people as “dead in trespasses and sins” before they became believers in Christ. Eph 2:1; Col 2:13 There is a very real and “spiritual” sense in which every soul will never die. Jesus’ story of the rich man who died and went to hell indicates a kind of “life” that no one would ever want to experience. Luke 16:23 Adam’s soul will continue to exist forever. He would die physically for sure. Then he will “live” forever in heaven or he will experience hell, which is biblically described as an endless misery. A living death, if you will. It is the second death. Rev 20:6

The demons are spirits that have life but they are evil. Likewise, fallen man is now defined as evil. He is alive physically and he still possesses a spirit. Jam 2:26 I suggest that the term “spiritually dead” is something of a necessary response to explain the fact that Adam did not immediately die physically on the day in which he ate from the tree. This would appear to make God out to be mistaken or caught in a lie. God said that they would *surely* die on the day in which they ate from the tree. Keep in mind that Jesus did refer to the new birth as a *spiritual rebirth*. John 3 As we might expect, the term “spirit” is a hard thing to nail down. It is used in different ways in Scripture.

(As you may know, there is also some difficulty with the Hebrew word for day, which is [yom]. If you are aware of the debate that exists over the word [yom] in the Genesis account of creation then you know what I mean. We probably don’t need to go there in our discussion of the fall since it is clear that something happened to Adam *in the very moment* he ate the forbidden fruit. He would live, in the body, for a few hundred more years, but he did die that day . . . somehow.)

Adam was now in a place of moral indebtedness to God. He transgressed God’s law. He was dirty and he stunk. He was not fit for intimacy with God. Thus, he was cut off from his life source. There was now enmity between Adam and God. Adam did not immediately drop dead but physical death was inevitable. He was cut off from the Tree of Life and we may assume that he began to age, terminally. He did not need immediate hospice care but his death was inevitable.

It is safe to say that God was not pleased with Adam, but we know from many places in Scripture, and perhaps science, that God was not taken by surprise. Adam may not have known it, but God had a plan for reconciliation all along. After eating the forbidden fruit, it is reasonable to conclude that Adam was immediately “dead in trespasses and sins.” But what does that mean? What are the implications of this death?

It is reasonable and biblical to believe that whatever happened to Adam was passed on to the rest of us. We are all sons and daughters of Adam. We are all “made sinners” thanks to his transgression. As a result, we will all die physically, at least. As we have seen, this is what Romans 5 is all about. It is God’s curse on Adam’s race.

A few questions and observations come to mind. Some will relate to our discussion of election. Could Adam still worship God after he fell? If so, would God be pleased with the worship? Would He honor it? Was this “death” due to Adam’s guilt for the sin, and/or did something happen within his very nature that now utterly prevents him from trusting or obeying God? Was he “dead” because of his guilt? Did this “death” now prevent him from independently doing anything right for the rest of his life? Did Adam’s fall merely make it harder for him to do the right thing ever again? Could he even *want* to do the right thing ever again, and for the right reason?

One thing is certain for both sides of our debate. Adam will never be justified before God by his obedience to the law. It is too late to be justified by the “law of works.” If he lived the rest of his life without sinning, he could not be justified by the law. He broke the law and the wages of sin is death. Rom 6:23

In his apostolic writings, when Paul explains what it means for believers to be “made alive” in Christ, he is giving us some insight into how Adam “died” after he ate from the tree. Likewise, Paul gives us some insight into how we each “die” when our sin is imputed to us. After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam was immediately dead in his trespass. He had sinned and his sin was imputed to his account because there was no valid excuse for it. Adam was not an infant or small child. He knew the tree was forbidden and he possessed the ability to abstain from it. Thus, he was no longer at peace with God. He was estranged from God. Paul said the following in Colossians 2:13,

And you being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive (quickened) together with Him, having forgiven all your trespasses . . .

Here we see that being dead in trespasses is the same as being unforgiven. Thus, we can be sure of one thing: being quickened (or made alive) means being forgiven. Adam was not “dead” before he committed his sin. The Colossian believers were “dead” before they were forgiven. There is nothing explicit in this text, which suggests that the Colossians now had the ability of godly sorrow by virtue of Jesus’ work on the cross. Their new life was brought about by their being forgiven. There is nothing here about a fundamental change in their constituent nature that enabled them to repent and believe the truth. It is certainly not said that their quickening *irresistibly* enabled them to repent and prohibited them from remaining unbelievers. Nothing is said in this text about the power of contrary choice. Jesus wiped out their debt to the law. Note also, that the Colossians were Gentiles. Their debt was to the laws, which were written on their hearts. (Some of which are identical to the laws given through Moses.) Rom 2 They had no debt to the specific laws of Moses which were given only to the Jews.

Paul also told Titus that God saves us,

. . . through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior . . . Titus 3:5

Here, regeneration is said to be a washing. This, of course, is a common theme of the gospel. We are washed by the blood of Christ, when it is imputed to our account. This also suggests that the new birth is brought about by our being cleansed from sin. Again, it is our forgiveness, which yields our new birth.

We have already noted how Paul said, in Romans 7, that he “was alive once without the law.” Rom 7:9 He then said, “When the commandment came, sin revived and I died.” Like Adam, Paul did not die physically when this happened in his life. This is what it means to be dead in trespasses and sins. **When God imputes our own sin to our**

own account we become dead in trespasses and sins. Whenever He imputes the guilt of our sin to Christ, we are quickened (or born again). The imputation of Christ's righteousness and the new birth are two ways of describing the same thing. They both describe our forgiveness. We may not know exactly when this takes place in our lives . . . but God does.

If Adam had actually died *spiritually*, in one sense, he would have dropped dead *physically*. James tells us that the body without the spirit is dead. James 2:26 The body cannot survive without the spirit but the spirit does survive without the body. Even the people in hell are alive in a spiritual sense, but they are “dead” because they are not forgiven. They still exist but they remain under the sentence of death. They remain under the curse of the law. Gal 3:10-13

In spite of their fall, Adam and Eve still had a relationship with God, and God is Spirit. John 4:24 They even had a “personal relationship” with God, but now it is one of personal enmity, guilt, and impending judgment. (Note: Preachers and teachers should quit describing the Christian faith as having a “personal relationship” with Jesus, or God. It is too vague and misleading. Every person has a “personal relationship” with God. That is the only kind of relationship that any “person” can have with the LORD, who is one God in three persons. When we repent and believe, then our personal relationship with God is no longer a relationship of enmity, but it becomes a reconciled relationship of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Rom 14:17 Everyone has a personal relationship with God. Some are at enmity with Him and some are at peace with Him.)

We know that Adam and Eve were still in conversation with God after the fall. Adam said that he heard the sound (or voice) of God in the garden. Thus, he was not spiritually deaf as if he was some kind of a spiritual corpse. Adam and Eve were immediately aware of the enmity that now existed between themselves and God; thus, they tried to cover their nakedness and hide. They were now afraid of God. This fear is more than reverence. Now, they are just plain scared of God. They had good reason to be. They just picked a fight with Him and their chances of winning aren’t good. They believed the words of the Devil and rejected the word of God. That is always a bad decision.

Let’s note a very important point of agreement here. Both sides of our debate acknowledge that Adam was in no position to fix this

self-inflicted disaster. He did not immediately *run to* God in godly sorrow and contrition. He may not have known if he could. Adam and Eve tried to fix things themselves and *ran from* God. God sought after Adam and this is an important principle. We do not naturally seek after God. If left entirely to ourselves we would all run from God in fear and animosity. Both sides of our debate agree on this point. If God does not seek us then we would not seek Him. The difference of course, is that the Calvinist teaches that God only seeks *some* fallen sinners. Once again, genuine Calvinists teach that the men and women in hell would never have had a genuine opportunity to repent, and be forgiven. God did not choose to help them. Our non-Calvinist teaches that God seeks after every sinner. The men and women who go to hell will know that God sought them and offered them mercy. Many will know that God provided (even paid) for their forgiveness in the gospel of Christ, but they rejected His love. Thus, the payment was not applied to their account.

Adam disrespected God by doubting His trustworthiness. He suppressed the truth. Rom 1:18 Adam and Eve did what they pleased in clear defiance of God's revealed will. They thumbed their noses at God and mankind has been doing that ever since. By sinning, Adam brought the condemnation of physical death into the world and he will transfer the disease of original sin to every person ever born. Adam opened the door that leads to hell. All together now:

O Adam what hast thou done? ¹

8.2 A FIGHT FOR THE AGES: ORIGINAL SIN VS COMMON GRACE

Perhaps the most important question relating to our debate is this: Did this "death" prevent Adam and his descendants from being contrite over their sin? As you must know, contrition is the essence of the condition of salvation by grace. The gospel, in a word, is about forgiveness. It may be something of a mystery (or antinomy) but we know that saving grace *has a condition*. We know that God gives grace to the humble. James 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5 So, did the fall utterly prohibit any humble desire to be reconciled with God . . . on God's terms? The Calvinist says it did. The non-Calvinist says it didn't.

As mentioned, historical Calvinists insist that “dead in sin” means much more than being “unforgiven.” They understand the term “dead in sin” to include a total (or radical) change in Adam’s heart, mind, body, and will. They insist that this corruption would prohibit any sincere repentance apart from the external intervention of God’s irresistible grace. The Heidelberg Catechism says that we are “wholly incapable of doing any good and inclined to all wickedness”.² Likewise, the Westminster Confession says:

Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto. (Chapter 9 Section 3)³

The Canons of Dort says that mankind . . .

. . . entailed on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity and perverseness of judgment, became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections.⁴

There are many texts of Scripture, which are used to describe the fallen condition of mankind. Scripture does use the phrase “dead in trespasses and sins”, but Scripture does not contain the term “Total Depravity.” To be fair, Scripture does not use the term “common grace” either. **Inferences concerning this “gray area” of Scripture are the focus of our debate.** It is important to note that our non-Calvinist would agree that mankind, if left to our fallen nature alone, would be utterly without hope. This is a big “if” because he does not believe that God has left anyone without the divine grace needed to counter Adam’s influence upon us. This is evident by the fact that no one does everything wrong. Unbelievers still make right moral choices, sometimes. Not every unbeliever robs banks, murders, and molests children. These are moral and spiritual decisions.

Genesis 6:5-7 describes the state of the world before the flood and it was not a pretty sight.

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the LORD said, “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.”

Paul told the Ephesians that they were dead in trespasses and sins. He said they,

... once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lust of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. Eph 2:2-3

This much is easy: There is no biblical way that someone could support the idea that mankind is basically good. Mankind is a mess, but gladly, God loves us and had a plan for our redemption all along. Eph 2:1-4

In Romans 1, 2, and 3 Paul labors the point of mankind's wickedness. However, he also explains that we are without excuse for our sin. He does so, without any mention of Adam's fall. This is the mystery, which we are trying to solve. In verse 18 of Chapter 1, Paul succinctly states the problem.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness; because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.

Paul then goes on to name many particular sins of which mankind is without excuse, yet with no mention of Adam's sin. Sexual immorality, which includes homosexuality, headlines the list. He names covetousness, maliciousness, envy, murder, strife, and deceit. He says we are backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, and disobedient to parents. He has it all pretty well covered. If you don't see yourself on this list, it is because you don't want to.

Paul goes on to quote the Old Testament where it simply says that there is none righteous, no, not one. No one seeks after God and no one understands. Rom 3: 10-18

When we isolate these texts of Scripture, it may *seem* that the Calvinists would be right. It *seems* that Adam's very nature was altered so much that he could not really do anything right anymore; then he passed this damnable trait on to the rest of us. It might seem that Adam could not be truly sorry for his sin and ask for mercy, but these texts do not explicitly say that. As we saw in the last chapter, Calvinists teach that everyone is born in this miserable, perilous, and helpless condition. They teach that after the first sin in the garden, all of mankind was not only born in sin, but we are each already condemned and incapable of the godly sorrow that leads to salvation. I say, it *seems clear* because of the following little proviso found in the Canons of Dort. Under Head 4, Article 4 it says,

There remain(s) however, in man since the fall, the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment.⁵

Although, they are quick to extinguish any hope we might have that this common grace could lead to saving faith, we should give the writers of the Canons some credit here. They had the integrity to bring up a biblical point that could bring down their entire system of salvation. They could have left this little statement out of their creed and few would have ever noticed. **This little statement describing the common grace of God is one of the most crucial distinctions in our whole debate.** This is where the plot really thickens. Now we need to ask whether this remaining glimmer of light, combined with the Holy Spirit's universal work in the conscience, is enough to enable a guilty sinner to repent and embrace the gospel promise. **The Calvinist says it is not. Our non-Calvinist says that it is.**

The Westminster writers also mention the “common operations” of the Spirit, which may be at work in the reprobate; but they, too, are quick to stomp out any spark of hope for their salvation. (See Chapter 10 Section 6 of the Confession and Question 68 of the Larger Catechism.)

Our non-Calvinist insists that Adam was still capable of humbly confessing his sin by virtue of this natural grace and common operations of the Spirit . . . and so are we. It is not possible for anyone to live perfectly, without committing any sin, but Scripture is clear that we can “do the things contained in the law.” We all feel the sting of conscience and desire to be forgiven. We can desire to be free from our slavery to sin.

God’s curse on Adam, and his race, was profound and severe. It is obviously still in effect today, but God said nothing explicit about our “wills” being so corrupt that they could not repent. The curse did not leave mankind without any ability to recognize their need for reconciliation. The curse left Adam, Eve, and their descendants with no ability to reconcile themselves to God. However, it did not leave them without the ability to desire reconciliation with God and believe His promise.

I know that a lot of talk about sin takes its toll. It’s like a barrage of body punches but stay with me. This is a crucial point in our battle of “inferences.” This may be the title fight in the context of our debate.

Weighing in, at one corner, the Bible says that fallen man can do “by nature” the things contained in the law, and evil fathers can give good gifts to their children. Rom 2:14; Mt 7: 11 Yet, in the other corner, the Bible says that the natural man cannot know the things of the Spirit of God and we are by nature children of wrath. 1Cor 2:14; Eph 2:3 The friction between these texts is at the heart of our dilemma.

Let’s see if Scripture can help us solve this tension. First, let’s stay in Romans. Again, we read in verse 18 of Chapter 1,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness; because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.

Please see right away how that God’s wrath is justified. The word “because” is very important. It signifies the reason for the wrath of God. This should go without saying, but there are some who do not

believe that God needs a reason, within reprobate souls, to send them to hell. I'm not joking; there are some, within the ranks of Calvinism, who believe that God would be just to sentence some souls to eternal hell, for no actual cause within that soul. They make God look like a sovereign sinner. Nevertheless, the reason, which justifies God's wrath, is that He has revealed enough of Himself to expect every one born into Adam's race *to trust Him*.

God has shown every sane adult what He requires of us. In Micah 6:8, we find a succinct summary of God's expectations.

He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

God expects us to walk in faith and He is pleased by our faith. Paul confirms our basic sense of justice. He clearly infers that it would not be just of God to bring His full wrath on someone who was ignorant of His expectations. This will be the feeble and faulty plea of atheists and agnostics when they are judged. They will try to plead ignorance and suggest that God did not give them enough evidence to believe in Him. But God, the divine Prosecutor, will prove beyond the shadow of a doubt, by the words of their own mouths, that He had written His law on their hearts. ". . . for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." Mt 12:37

Some may be surprised to know that the Scriptures are not mentioned here, in Romans, as evidence of God's power and glory. Scripture certainly is evidence of God's power and glory. It reveals His will but Paul does not point to it in this indictment against mankind. Paul explains that the creation, itself, declares the glorious truth of God. Psalm 19 teaches the same thing. Not every person has been able to read the Bible or hear it taught from a credible source. But everyone has witnessed the miracle of creation. Our conscience is included in the miracle of creation. It speaks volumes to God's attributes and His will.

It is essential to a proper understanding of salvation to grasp how men "suppress" (or hold down) the truth. This would actually be impossible for anyone who is dead in trespasses and sins, by the typical Calvinistic definition. In their understanding, lost sinners are

like corpses lying face down at the bottom of the sea of sin. They couldn't really suppress anything spiritual because they have no capacity for comprehending the things of the Spirit. This is illustrated in Mark Driscoll's previously mentioned sermon series Religion Saves + 9 Other Myths. Mark professes, loudly, to be a Calvinist. In his sermon on predestination, he made the following typical statement on depravity while defending the Calvinistic view:

Dead people don't make any decisions.⁶

Sometimes preachers embellish. Some do it a lot. Sometimes preachers get in a hurry when dealing with complex and controversial issues. I think Mark was doing both. Perhaps we can give him the benefit of the doubt and suggest that he did not intend to be understood in an absolute sense. Surely, Mark knows that unbelievers make decisions every day. Some of them are good decisions and some of them are bad. They are decisions nevertheless. Mark probably means that unbelievers *can't* make the decision to repent and believe the truth. They must be given a new heart before they can humbly embrace the gospel. Saying it this way doesn't sound as dramatic, but you know how preachers can be. (Presentation is important but it should never obscure the truth.)

If you need them, here are a few more Calvinistic descriptions of someone who is "spiritually dead" as they define the term. Remember, these descriptions include children who would be born spiritually dead. These will help us see how Calvinists interpret the Scripture and the previous confessional statements. I will not bother to list each specific source. If you are familiar with this debate then you know that these descriptions are ubiquitous among Calvinistic writers and preachers. If you are not familiar with Calvinistic writers then you will get the idea pretty quickly. As they see it, all unbelievers, *including children*:

... cannot see anything desirable in God or Christ.

... lack the spiritual ability to appraise spiritual truths.

... are only free and capable of resisting the Holy Spirit.

... are under the control of a darkened understanding.

. . . are so morally blind that they uniformly prefer evil instead of good.

. . . have no desire for reconciliation with God.

. . . have no pulse, no warmth. They are lifeless with respect to the things of God.

. . . can only will evil concerning their relationship with God.

. . . are blind and stupid concerning the things of God.

. . . are deeply anti-God . . . under an unholy necessity to sin . . . totally unable to do good.

. . . do not seek God . . . indeed they cannot seek God because their heart is too corrupt.

. . . may say their prayers, but they cannot really pray.

. . . cannot repent with godly sorrow or exercise that faith which is unto salvation.

I hope you can see the difficulty in reconciling these descriptions with their own confessional statements regarding man's ability for doing the right things. In addition, these convictions are virtually impossible to reconcile with George Whitefield's assumption that lost sinners could "tremble" over their actual sins. Remember, the Canons of Dort said,

There remain(s) however, in man since the fall, the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment.⁷

When we isolate texts of Scripture from the rest of Scripture, we can get in trouble; this is the Calvinist's mistake regarding the term "dead in sin." Calvinists have a hard time reconciling these unqualified

indictments with the biblical descriptions of the spiritual capacity of sinners. See if you can reconcile Dort's description of the common grace of God with a couple more examples of how Calvinists define dead in sin.

J.C. Ryle describes being dead in sin by alluding to Jacob when Joseph wept over *his body* after he died, and by the widow's son who was brought to Jesus . . . dead. Gen 50:1 Luke 7:12 In his message entitled, Alive or Dead, the bishop insists that God says "we are all by nature spiritually dead." It is clear how he defines the term. He strikes a very literal comparison to *physical* death.⁸

C.H. Spurgeon in his sermon entitled *The Necessity of the Spirit's Work* says,

Holy Scripture tells us that man by nature is dead in trespasses and sins. It does not say that he is sick, that he is faint, that he has grown callous, and hardened, and seared: it says he is absolutely dead . . .⁹

Spurgeon then goes on to say that when we see dead men raising themselves from their graves, removing their sheets, opening their own coffin lids, and walking down the streets, then perhaps we may believe that souls who are dead in sin may turn to God, recreate their own nature, and make themselves heirs of heaven. But not until then. (You may not agree, entirely, with Spurgeon's comments, but you have to admire the way he made them.) Please note also, that Scripture *does* tell us that man by nature is sick, hardened, lost, and enslaved in sin. Spurgeon is incorrect at this point. "Dead" is not the only metaphor that is used to describe our condition as unbelievers. Isa 1; 53:6; 61:1 Luke 4:18; 1 Pet 2:24; Mt 13:15; Rom 6:6 Mt.18:11

In his confessions, Augustine said that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.¹⁰ But it would be impossible to have a spiritually restless heart if you were spiritually dead, as defined by Calvinists.

I hope you see the tension that arises in understanding the relationship between our natural depravity and God's common grace. If someone is not spiritually alive, how could he/she be spiritually rebellious or restless? A corpse is not rebellious. **Calvinists uniformly marginalize the power of the common grace of God. They often preach as if it doesn't even exist.** This point serves to illustrate what

happens if we only read, and emphasize, the indictments of mankind in the Bible. It leaves us with an incomplete understanding of what the Bible teaches about our ability to repent. Emphasizing *only* the indictments of mankind would make you wonder how anyone could ever do anything right . . . or contrite.

This is why we must not ignore, or minimize, that which Scripture teaches regarding common grace. We must not disparage the gift of God's common grace, which He bestows on everyone. The common grace of God vindicates His just judgment on us all. If we marginalize God's common grace, it would rob Him of His right to indict and condemn the unbeliever. God would be sending souls to hell who could not prevent their damnable sins or even confess them. They would perish for being what they were born to be. It would not be a just judgment. **Thus, you can see how the Calvinistic system lives or dies with the inference that God imputes the guilt of Adam's sin to his posterity.**

The Apostle Paul says that fallen man suppresses the truth, which God has shown them. That would be a conscious decision. It is absurd to suggest that a corpse could refuse some medicine or reject some good advice. In Romans, it is pretty clear that fallen man is somehow capable of understanding the truth enough to knowingly resist it. A "spiritual" corpse would not knowingly resist anything spiritual because it could not. Some degree of spiritual life and understanding is required to "change the truth of God into a lie and worship and serve the creation rather than the Creator" Rom 1:25. A spiritual corpse could not do that.

Those who are spiritually dead by the Calvinistic definition could not have the knowable attributes of God "manifest in them" Rom 1:19. They would be too dead to recognize them. Nevertheless, these texts are used by virtually all Christians to show that every man is culpable for rejecting the truth, which is revealed in nature and in their conscience. This is really a moot point to the true Calvinist. Remember, he believes that God has rejected the reprobate for their sin in Adam, and not their own personal suppression of the truth. The reprobate would not have had an opportunity to witness the invisible attributes of God in nature before they were, allegedly, rejected. Romans 1 and 2 explain that those who reject the truth are doing so with their eyes wide open.

Unbelievers know what they are doing when they ignore God, shake their fist in His face, or worship all kinds of idols.

This is one reason why God's wrath is a just wrath. What justice is there, and what glory does God receive by pouring out the fierceness of His wrath on someone who absolutely could not avoid deserving it? This would be like punishing a rock for being hard. It merely demonstrates that the "Potter" can "destroy" something which He has made. No big surprise there. Paul will go on to say that, those who suppress the truth are haters of God. That, also, would be a conscious spiritual decision. One must be capable of knowing God in order to hate Him. The hatred of God would be a spiritual thing. It is the same with the devils, who believe and tremble. James 2:19 People can do the same thing.

Paul also says we *understand* that those who commit the sins, on his list, are worthy of death. Rom 1:32 This is another spiritual truth, which also requires a level of spiritual knowledge and discernment. A spiritual corpse could not know God enough to hate Him or understand that he will be judged. Anyone who has this level of understanding of the things of God must be able to comprehend spiritual things. The very fact that one sinner can recognize a sin in someone else, and hypocritically judge them, demonstrates an ability to understand some of the spiritual things of God. It has been said that the "charge of hypocrisy is the complement that vice pays to virtue." It's true. The accusation of hypocrisy exposes some "moral ability" within the accuser and the accused. Unbelievers reject the truth but this does not necessarily mean they are *incapable* of receiving the truth.

8.3 UNBELIEVERS . . . CAN BELIEVE

Paul says the invisible attributes of God are clearly seen by all sinners. Rom 1:20 Attributes which are *invisible* must be seen by faith. They can't be seen with the natural eye; therefore, we should conclude that all men have the spiritual ability to exercise faith in God. They may be able to suppress and forfeit that ability but they are naturally equipped with it. This ability will be based upon the degree of revelation to which they have been exposed.

Everyone can see in the creation that God is very big, very smart, very powerful, very wise, and very good . . . especially as He is compared

to us. It is a humbling and spiritual thing for anyone to gaze upon a snow-capped mountain set against a deep blue sky. The sunset over the ocean is an awesome sight. God's power is evident in the hurricane, tornado, tsunami, and blizzard. God's love and wisdom are manifest in the earth's natural ability to sustain life. Admittedly, these natural revelations do not tell us specifically about Jesus but they put us in our place before the majesty of God. Kids are quick to recognize the evident greatness and superiority of God. Jesus spoke of the faith of children. It is adults who suppress the truth.

C. H. Spurgeon, in a booklet, reprinted by Chapel Library, entitled Advice for Seekers said,

Little children are wonderful judges of character; they know intuitively who is kind.¹¹

I think he was right, and this is more evidence of the innate capacity for spiritual things in the human heart, in spite of Adam's influence. If children were dead in sin, by the Calvinistic definition, they would be lousy judges of character. Nobody needs a Bible to know that we should do the right thing, love kindness, and walk humbly before God. Micah 6:8 In verse 28 of Romans 1, we read,

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased [reprobate] mind . . .

This text raises the same type of problem for the Calvinist. If every person is born "dead on arrival," by the Calvinistic definition, how could it be said of them that they did not like to *retain* God in their knowledge? They never would have had God in their knowledge to begin with. How could anyone "born spiritually dead" ever have God in their knowledge? Even more difficult to imagine is how anyone could have God in their knowledge before they were born.

Here we must also ask, how could someone who was born "spiritually dead" by the Calvinistic definition, exchange the truth of God for a lie? Spiritually dead people could not make such spiritual trades. It takes some real imagination to accept that the whole race was somehow aware of what we were doing when we were "in Adam," according to the Calvinistic explanation. Calvinists typically interpret

these texts to be speaking of all mankind but it is not consistent with their view. As seen in the long list of quotes, they teach that all of mankind, after the fall, cannot understand (or know) anything spiritual. **By the Calvinistic definition, spiritually dead people could not be capable of what Paul describes in these verses, unless they have been given the ability.** We have all been given this ability. It is through the common grace of God that we can understand basic spiritual principles.

Paul is describing what happens to every one as they grow into adulthood. We all start with the basic knowledge of God written on our hearts and seen in nature. As we mature, the lusts and pride of life step up their relentless assault on our souls. We begin to understand the laws of God and we don't like them. We find them difficult to keep. We also become exposed to the false teachings of other religions and worldviews. We are exposed to the myriad of lies, which are put forth by those who profess to be wise and worship the creature more than the Creator. This is very evident when kids go off to college. It explains the statistics which have shown a staggering percentage of young people who "lose their faith" when they get out on their own, and become exposed to secular ideas.

In the story of Jonah, we have two examples of Gentiles who were capable of faith in the true God without hearing about Jesus. The crew on Jonah's boat witnessed a miracle (after they tossed Jonah overboard). They immediately offered a sacrifice to the LORD and took vows. This does not necessarily mean they were eternally saved but it does show that they were *not* dead in trespasses and sins, according to the Calvinistic definition. God dramatically revealed Himself and they quickly became believers in Jonah's God. Likewise, the Ninevites repented at Jonah's preaching and Jesus said that they would rise up at judgment and condemn the Jews who rejected Christ. Mt 12:41

8.4 TWO KINDS OF STUPID

As noted, sometimes the Bible will seem to contradict itself when we fail to distinguish between contexts. In Romans 1:31 and 3:11, Paul names the sin of being "without understanding" or "undiscerning." These texts could certainly be used to support the Calvinistic definition of dead in sin. However, they would also seem to contradict

Paul's earlier statements that we possessed "understanding" and the "knowledge of God" [Rom 1:20, 21, 28](#). Here we must remember, again, that words can be used in different ways. Both sides of our debate will likely agree that there is an *innocent* ignorance, which genuinely lacks the specific information of the gospel. There are people who have never heard about Jesus and it is not their fault. Likewise, small children and handicapped people cannot understand the truth, but it is not their fault. On the other hand, there is also a type of ignorance that is deliberate and guilt worthy. There are those, who have been told the truth, but don't want to hear it. They understand it but they do not want to *retain* it. Thus, they are said to be "without understanding." Indeed, there are none so blind as those who *will not* see.

We are told by scholars that this particular term for "without understanding" could be translated as "foolish" or "stupid." It does not necessarily mean that everyone is utterly without any comprehension of God, or His revealed will. It obviously could not mean that, in this context, since it is stated that they did not want to *retain* the knowledge of God. We do not typically call people stupid, in a given context, unless they should know better. We do not call a toddler stupid for taking some candy from a store. We would call a police officer stupid for taking some candy from a store. He knows better. Forrest Gump's mom was right. Stupid is what stupid does.

Stupid is a pretty good word to describe anyone who would want to trade his right understanding of the true God for a lie. Stupid is a good way to describe eating from the one prohibited tree in the entire paradise of the Garden of Eden. Stupid is a good way to describe making an idol of gold and bowing down to it right after the real God had delivered you from years of oppression, by supernatural miracles. Stupid is a good way to describe any lack of conformity to the revealed law of God, mine included. Occasionally, my Dad would say, "Sometimes you just have to call stupid . . . stupid." I think he was right on that; I'm grateful he was not afraid to apply it to me, when needed.

We can all be thankful that God does not leave anyone entirely to the flesh. He comes to us in His common grace. When God writes His law on our hearts, He enables us to think spiritually. [Rom 7:14](#) As the sun shines and the rain falls on everyone, so we all receive the common grace of God in some measure. He gives us His law through our conscience. These revelations draw us to the Lord. He shows us

His invisible attributes in the things that are made. We would not know God if He did not reveal Himself to us . . . first. We would not love God if He did not love us first. 1 John 4:19

We also know that the Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. John 15:26; 16:7-11 We see in Scripture that the Spirit is said to be working on the *world*, not the Church only. It is also interesting that the Holy Spirit is called the Comforter (or Helper) in this context. He does more than indict the world of sin. The Holy Spirit helps the world to understand sin, righteousness, and judgment. Therefore, every adult is without excuse before God because they are enabled to see their need and believe the truth. We must not short sell the common grace of God. **By marginalizing the scope and power of God's common grace, Calvinists present God as a heavenly Father who mercilessly beats some of His "offspring" for that which they cannot understand or perform. We must avoid this needless attack on the character of God.**

Lastly, I want us to note God's answer to Job when He finally spoke to him at the end of his miserable ordeal. Job 38-42 God did not specifically answer Job's questions about why he endured such a severe trial. However, God did explain why He expects every sane sinner to trust Him, in spite of life's pain. You will remember that God reminded Job of a relatively short list of the wonderful glories of His creation. He instructed Job to consider how the planets are suspended in space. He asked Job if he knew how to make it rain or snow. He asked Job if he could make large birds fly. The Lord drilled Job with a line of questioning that should shut the mouth of everyone who is ever tempted to doubt the wisdom, power, and holiness of God. God not only explained that He *should* be trusted but He inferred that He *could* be trusted by anyone who can thoughtfully observe the creation.

The common grace of God does not enable us to live without sin, but it does enable us to live by faith; we know that the just shall live by their faith.

8.5 SUMMARY

All of this is labored in order to refute two false conclusions of historical Calvinism. The first error of historical Calvinism is that the guilt of Adam's transgression would be imputed to each of his

descendants at their conception. This is not biblical. It is not what Romans 5 (or Psalm 51) is teaching; it would not be just. We each throw the gasoline of our own sin on the fire that Adam started, but we didn't start the fire. This is an important distinction, which avoids charging God with injustice. God is not excluding any newborn babies from the hope, or opportunity, of being forgiven. Unbelievers will be punished for their own impenitent sins and their independent suppression of the truth.

The second false notion of historical Calvinism is that being “dead in sin” means we are utterly incapable of repentance and faith, until we are overcome by external and irresistible grace. It is better to understand that being “dead in sin” means unforgiven. It means that our own deliberate sin is imputed to our own account, and there is no hope for us in the law. We are dead to God. If we die “in our sins” then we will perish. If we humbly believe God’s truth then the guilt of our sin is forgiven, by virtue of Christ’s sacrifice. This forgiveness makes us alive to God. It quickens (or regenerates) us. We become born again. Through faith, we are restored to fellowship with God by the imputed righteousness of Christ. Col 2:13

Our old nature is not changed. The flesh never really improves, nor is it utterly destroyed in this life. But it is defeated. This is the victory that overcomes the world . . . even our faith. 1 John 5:4 The Bible does not define being “dead in sin” as unable to humbly repent and trust God’s revelation. This is an inference of Calvinism. Jesus is the incarnate Word. Unbelievers can believe by the common grace of God. They can humble themselves and face the music of God’s just anger with their own sin. It is in their power to do so. The common grace of God enables the working of conscience, which enables repentance and saving faith.

The Calvinist is saying that unbelievers must be miraculously born again before they can repent and believe the truth. Our non-Calvinist is saying that the common grace of God is sufficient for saving faith, through which we will become born again. This may be the most crucial distinction in the whole study.

9.0 Romans 9

As mentioned, Romans 9 is generally considered the big trump card for the Calvinistic cause. There are other texts, which are used to support their conclusions on election and reprobation, but this one seems to be set forth as the knockout punch for any form of opposition. We should look at this chapter of Scripture and see what is said about the eternal destiny of every baby ever born . . . and what is not said.

I believe we will see that the best synopsis of the Calvinistic view of salvation is “The just shall live by unconditional election.” Indeed, some Calvinists would prefer to see the teaching acronym TULIP returned to its original UTLIP, and they may be right. In fact, they could simplify the whole thing and just call it “U”. It’s all about “Unconditional Election” in their view. (For those who may not know the meaning of TULIP, don’t worry about it. You don’t need to.)

Calvinists do spend a lot of time defending the doctrine of justification by faith (alone), and that is a good thing. They know better than to go into the world bluntly teaching, “Whoever is already elect will be saved.” In their view of Romans 9, it becomes clear that there is only one hinge on which salvation turns; it is God’s sovereign choice of who will have faith.

Chapters 10 and 11 of Romans are important in understanding Chapter 9. I will not write them in their entirety here, so you may wish to open your Bible as we discuss these chapters. The reason I think all three chapters are needed is that there is a distinct break from the first eight chapters of Romans. In chapters 9-11, Paul is moving to a discussion of God’s use of the Jewish people in His plan of salvation. The first eight chapters lay out for us the doctrines of salvation themselves. Chapters 9-11 explain how the Jews fit into God’s plan.

Woven throughout the first chapters of Romans are references to the distinctions and similarities between God’s dealings with the Jews and His dealings with the Gentiles. Paul explains that although the Jews enjoyed many advantages, as God’s chosen people, they are not individually dragged into heaven based on their status as God’s chosen people. They were called the “beloved” people of God but that does not mean every individual Israelite would be saved. This becomes painfully clear in chapters 9-11.

If you were a Jew, who mistakenly thought that being born Jewish meant an automatic pass into eternal life, then you would not be comfortable with these three chapters. It is certainly not all bad news but it is a sober assessment of their condition. Paul begins chapter 9 by revealing his passionate concern for any of his Jewish brethren who would be lost. In the first verse of Chapter 10, Paul states that his concern was also a prayer. His prayer for Israel is that they might be saved. It is apparent, Paul did not teach that being born, as an Israelite, was all that a Jew needed in order to be forgiven.

These three chapters of Paul's epistle focus on God's relationship and dealings with the ethnic (or physical) descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They *also* speak to the spiritual and eternal aspects of the promises made to Abraham, and that is where things get a little tricky. If you are not very familiar with the chapter, then you may want to read all of Romans 9, now, before we begin to break it down.

9.1 PAUL'S CONCERN FOR THE SALVATION OF JEWS

Romans 9:1-5.

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.

The chapter begins with Paul's declaration of his great love for his countrymen (or relatives) according to the flesh, which are the Israelites. He is gravely concerned for them as he solemnly declares his sorrow and grief for their souls. **Paul's concern for the salvation of his Jewish brethren shows that it is possible to be loved by God yet still be subject to eternal condemnation.** The unbelieving Jews were "beloved" and "chosen" by God; yet many were still lost in the context of eternal salvation. Either God is confused or there is more to being saved than being a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, or even

Jacob. We see again, that there is an *individual* condition for salvation, even for the chosen descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Paul's concern is expressed in general terms for any who are Jewish; yet we know that not all Jews had rejected their Messiah. Most of the fledgling Christian Church was made up of Jews. Paul himself and the 12 apostles were Jewish. Yet we know that the majority of the leadership, and the nation of Israel as a whole, had rejected Christ. This is important in understanding the context of Romans 9-11. It is one reason that the chapters can be difficult to understand. **Paul speaks of specific individuals and he speaks of nations . . . both Jews and Gentiles. He also speaks of both eternal blessings and earthly blessings.** (It is easy here to jumble up the context. This is what each side of our debate says the other side is doing wrong.)

Paul's wish that he might be accursed from Christ for the Jews' sake is reminiscent of Moses' prayer in Exodus 32. This is where Moses told God to blot his name out of His book if He would not forgive the people for their "great sin." You will remember that this was after the people had made the golden calf and worshipped it instead of the LORD. God was angry and threatening to consume the people in His wrath. Moses was angry. Aaron was whining and pointing fingers. It was all a big mess.

(You will remember, also, that this is another place in scripture where it appears that God made a decision, *in the present moment*, based on Moses' intercessory prayer. We are led to believe that things could have gone either way. God could have done as He had threatened. He could have wiped out all the people of Israel and started over with Moses, or He could have had mercy on them. No promises to Abraham would have been broken if He would have destroyed them all and started over with the descendants of Moses. Moses, himself, was a descendant of Abraham through Jacob. Like so many other dramatic events in Scripture, it would squelch the existential drama of the whole scene if we view Moses' intercession as some kind of irresistible working of God's Spirit in his heart. Again, I must stress, let's not be too reliant on our understanding of God's use of His omniscience. Our understanding may prove to be flawed.)

If the election of the Jews, as God's chosen people, included their individual salvation, then Paul would not be so concerned for their souls. Apparently, there was confusion on this point in the early

church. (There still is today.) This should come as no surprise. Many of the first Christians were Jewish; they thought that being born in the line of Jacob was all they needed to be eternally saved from sin. Paul obviously does not agree.

It is noteworthy here to acknowledge that Paul's desire for the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles was indiscriminate. **Paul never seemed worried that he might desire someone to be saved whom Jesus did not die for. He never seems concerned that he might desire the salvation of someone who God would not want to give the gift of faith to. But Calvinism would have us believe that this is a real possibility.** Acts 17:26:29

9.2 NOT EVERY DESCENDANT OF ABRAHAM WAS CHOSEN

Romans 9: 6-9

But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, “In Isaac your seed shall be called.” That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. For this is the word of promise: “At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son.”

Paul begins to explain why he is so concerned for the Jews. He explains that not everyone born in the physical lineage of Abraham was to be included in all aspects of the promises made to Abraham. Although Ishmael was born to Abraham, he was not the “child of the promise.” God had a specific line of physical descendants in mind for the earthly fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. The promise would not be fulfilled through Ishmael and he will shortly explain that it was not through Esau either. Both sides of our debate over election, typically, agree on this.

Paul will show that there are two distinct contexts of the promise made to Abraham. One is physical and the other is spiritual. One context is primarily earthly and ethnic in nature. This aspect of the covenant is “in your flesh.” It is symbolized by circumcision. Gen 17:13 It is also *unconditional* and *irresistible*. Jacob and his descendants had no choice but to be God’s chosen people. It was

God's decision, not theirs. The Jews did not ask for it, neither could they refuse it. Abraham's physical descendants, through Isaac and Jacob would enjoy many privileges and responsibilities not given to the rest of the tribes and nations of the world. This includes tribes and nations that may have descended from Abraham himself. Abraham and his chosen descendants were given a land, a law, the prophets and much more. God defended them and helped them to grow as a nation against incredible odds. It is an "everlasting" covenant, at least as long as Jacob's descendants have a flesh. Indeed, there are also aspects of the covenant, which are eternal. These are not always easy to distinguish.

In a more spiritual and global context, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will actually be used to usher in the Savior of the entire world. Nevertheless, it would not be accomplished in a very glorious or honorable way. The Savior will come through the nation of Israel's miserable and consistent failure to trust and obey their God. (This could lend itself to speculation as to why God chose Jacob over Esau and it would not be very flattering to Jacob. But it serves little purpose to expand on the speculation.) The Lamb of God will come through Isaac's son Jacob. He will not come through Isaac's firstborn son Esau. The Lamb will die for the sins of Israel and the rest of the world.

Another context of this promise to Abraham was spiritual and individual in nature. We *now* know that aspects of the promise to Abraham apply to any individual, from any nation on earth, who would trust God as Abraham did. (Just as Abel, Enoch, and Noah did before him.) This is the hidden mystery, which comes to light with the advent of Christ and His "New Covenant." This context of the promise made to Abraham regarding his descendants is conditional upon sincere faith in the revealed truth of God. This is clear in the New Testament, especially in Paul's letter to the Galatians:

Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying "In you all the nations shall be blessed." So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. Gal 3:7-9

As you may know, this lesson came hard for many of the Jews, including some of the Apostles. For centuries, they had been told that

they were the chosen people of God. They had enjoyed God's unique favor, protection, and chastisement. It was hard for them to understand that nations and tribes who had been their enemies were included in the blessings promised to their forefather Abraham. It didn't make sense to them that God would love Gentiles. They had been told by God (and helped by God) to conquer the Gentiles who occupied the Promised Land. Their understanding of God's promises to Abraham was too narrow and earthbound. They saw only the physical and temporal aspects of the promises. They missed the spiritual and eternal aspects of the promises. This point is clear in Scripture. Mt 3:9; John 8:33-40; Rom 2:29; 4:12; Phil 3:3

This lesson also comes hard for many who are not Jewish. Many Gentiles would not like to be considered "the Israel of God." Gal 6:16 There are those who would be reluctant to follow Jesus simply because He was a Jew. It does not make sense to them that God would love Jews. They think Jews are some kind of inferior people. They would rather die than be associated with them. The sin we call "racism" can go both ways and it has no place the Kingdom of God.

This important distinction within the promise to Abraham was put in terms that all Jews could relate to. It is compared to the differences between the children of Abraham. You remember that Sara and Abraham thought that it would be a good idea to have a child by Sara's maidservant, Hagar. They supposed that God would use that child (Ishmael) to fulfill His promise to Abraham. They assumed that Sara could not have children in her old age, so they decided to take matters into their own hands. Perhaps, they assumed that God needed help to keep His incredible promise. Throughout their history, every Jew understood that they were not descendants of Ishmael, but of Isaac, who was born miraculously to Sara and Abraham in their old age. As you know, we can chalk it up as another lesson learned about the trustworthiness of God.

9.3 JACOB I HAVE LOVED BUT ESAU I HAVE HATED . . .

Romans 9:10-13

And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our Father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having

done any good or evil, that the purpose of election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, “The older shall serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.”

Paul now moves to another example, familiar to the Jews, showing that God’s ways are not our ways. The Jews also knew that not everyone born in the lineage of Abraham, *or Isaac*, was a true ethnic Israelite. They did not consider themselves children of Ishmael or children of Esau, even though Ishmael and Esau were both descendants of Abraham.

This is where it begins to get tricky, and we need to remember the word “concurrence” which we looked at earlier. The Jews, to whom Paul was writing, would have known the account of the twins born to Isaac’s wife, Rebecca. They were aware of the sneaky ways that Jacob snatched the traditional blessing from Esau, who was the firstborn of the twins. You remember that Jacob got Esau to trade his birthright for some food when he was hungry. Also, Rebecca and Jacob carried out a clever little charade, or “sting” operation, to secure Isaac’s blessing on Jacob, instead of Esau. Gen 25, 27

You will remember that everything went according to plan. Jacob, the younger twin, stole the blessing that would normally go to the firstborn (Esau). Also *concurrently*, the will of God was accomplished. For reasons known only to God, He wanted the elder to be subordinate to the younger. No promises of God were broken. It merely broke with tradition. Again, as we will see shortly, God can do whatever He wants, with that which is His, within the scope of His holy character. God wanted Jacob and his descendants to be His chosen people for the purposes of making His glory known. God would use Jacob’s descendants to bring the man Christ Jesus into the world, and He would be the Savior of the world. These chosen descendants of Jacob will be called the Jews. They are the people of Israel. They are God’s beloved people. For reasons that God does not bother to explain, He did not want Esau and his descendants to be the heirs of *the earthly aspects* of His promise to Abraham.

So far, all this should not be too hard to understand and accept, but this is where we come to the text that has caused no small stir in the history of the Christian Church. We come now to the words, which, I think, have even caused some scholars to lose their bearings. We

have come to the texts, which have fueled the Calvinistic assumption that this election is about Jacob's eternal salvation and Esau's eternal reprobation:

Jacob I have loved but Esau I have hated.

We should slow down here and examine these words. They are unique in Scripture; they may not mean what the Calvinists teach. Paul is quoting the prophet Malachi. Malachi made this prophecy to the people of Israel, centuries *after* Jacob and Esau had died.

This is one of the places in Scripture where it is good to follow the advice of experienced Bible teachers, and keep reading to get the context. The natural inclination when we come to a difficult text in the Bible is to stop immediately and try to figure out what the meaning is, *without* carefully considering what has gone before and what is yet to come. We are slow to trust that which we don't immediately understand. If you are not familiar with these texts then you may wish to read on through the chapter before you go on here.

Like many texts of Scripture, if you isolate this statement from the context, and the rest of the Bible, you might conclude the wrong thing. The historic Calvinistic interpretation of the words, "Jacob I have loved but Esau I have hated," is actually pretty short and simple. It can be summed up here by quoting G. I. Williamson, the commentator on the Westminster Confession, who we have already quoted. On page 33 of his explanation of the Confession's Chapter 3, Section #5, he says,

Jacob was chosen to eternal life, and Esau was passed by and left to the punishment he deserved.¹

I must admit, I appreciate it when Calvinists are so forthright. It doesn't happen often enough and it makes the debate easier to negotiate. Here we will accuse the Calvinist of making some basic mistakes in his interpretation of Scripture. Likewise, you can be sure that the Calvinist will be accusing the non-Calvinist of some mistakes in their interpretation as well. Each side will be accused of wrenching the texts from their context. Let's see if we can sort it out.

First, the Calvinistic interpreter takes a single text about God hating one man, and permits it to virtually nullify numerous texts in the Bible,

which surely seem to teach that God universally loves every sinner; He actually desires that every sinner be saved. It is impossible to teach that God actually desires every sinner to be saved, and at the same time teach that He hated Esau before he was born. It makes God out to be double minded if we teach that He desires every sinner to be saved but He refuses to save every sinner . . . unless there is an independent human condition for salvation. True Calvinism teaches that Jesus would not have died for Esau in any saving sense. The Calvinist will insist that all of the texts which show Jesus coming to die for (and/or save) the world do not mean what they appear to mean. The Calvinist teaches that Jesus died for *some sinners* in every nation and tribe of the world. He did not die for every individual sinner in the world. (We will list some of these texts, and elaborate on them, in Chapter 12.)

The Calvinist also allows this text to circumvent the Scripture, which teaches that every man will be held responsible to receive the truth that is seen in nature and implanted on every heart. Ps 19; Rom 1-2; Job 38-42 Neither Jacob nor Esau would have been able to witness creation before this alleged judgment was made. In the Calvinistic system, this election, which would be salvific, would not have been made based on their response to the law, which will be written on their hearts. Mr. Williamson, and every real Calvinist, is guilty of taking that which may be implied by one text and allowing it to over rule that which is clear, and repeated, in many other texts.

Next, the Calvinist confuses that which is spiritual with that which is physical and earthly. He assumes that this earthly election of Jacob is spiritual and eternal. **However, this election of Jacob is primarily ethnic in nature. It is concerning the physical descendants of Abraham. It is not salvific.** Thus, Calvinists make the same kind of mistake that the Jews made concerning the coming of Christ. They thought the Messiah would come as a conquering King and deliver them from Gentile rule; as David did with the Philistines. Jesus did not set up His kingdom in a political or military sense. Instead of delivering the Jews from the Romans, Jesus was executed by the Romans. This is not what the Jews had envisioned regarding the coming of their Messiah. Thus, the Jews missed the spiritual implications of many Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of the Christ.

(It could be argued that many in the Church today, who are looking for Jesus to return and set up an earthly Kingdom, are making the

same mistake again. Rest assured, we will not take the time to open up that mystery here and now.) To be fair, it can be difficult sometimes, to discern in Scripture that which should be spiritually understood from that which should be physically understood, and what may include both. Romans 9-11 is one such place.

The Calvinist takes the term “hate” and fails to understand it in its specific context. When Jesus told us to hate our mothers and fathers, He did not mean to say that God hated our parents. He also, did not mean it in the same context in which we should hate sin. Luke 14:26; Rom 12:9; Ps 97:10 We are commanded to love our enemies, therefore it stands to reason that God can love His enemies. It is also possible for God to love sinners in one context and hate them in another. Remember, words can have two meanings. Even Led Zeppelin knew that.

Gird up the loins of your mind and see if you can follow the following. Better read slowly here . . . this is a little involved.

We notice right away, Mr. Williamson said that Esau was left to the punishment he *deserved*. He did not say that Esau was left to the punishment that *he would eventually deserve*. This is not a careless mistake even though Paul is clear that Esau had not committed any sins before he was born. (Calvinists don’t make careless mistakes. Their mistakes are carefully thought through and well defended.) As we saw in the previous chapters, the historical Calvinist teaches that Esau deserved eternal punishment *before he was born*. He was deserving of hell before he had actually done anything evil. They believe everyone deserves to go to hell by the time they are born.

All that business earlier, in Romans 1 & 2, about mankind being “without excuse” is out the window in the Calvinistic doctrines of reprobation. It’s a moot point, at best. Esau would have been rejected for salvation long before he would have witnessed the invisible attributes of God in the things that are made. He would have been designated to be a vessels of eternal wrath long before he felt the first twinge of conscience, or actually did anything wrong.

Remember, historical Calvinists are sure that both Jacob and Esau deserved hell from the moment they were born because *they sinned* in Adam. As we’ve seen, Calvinism teaches that before Adam sinned in the garden, God had already decided to save Jacob and damn Esau.

He did not need to foresee anything about their actual lives. He only needed to foresee Adam's fall and His own sovereign response to it.

So what do Calvinists say that Esau actually did wrong in order to deserve God's eternal hatred at birth? You probably know the answer to that question by now. The answer is nothing . . . absolutely nothing. He never actually did anything, which would warrant God's eternal anger. I know that sounds bizarre, and you would expect more from such thoughtful people, but that is the historic Calvinistic opinion of Paul's words. (Remember, George Whitefield said we could be damned without committing an *actual* sin.) We see, again, that Calvinists rely heavily upon their understanding of God's omniscience and it can take you to some pretty strange conclusions.

Only in the Reformed doctrines of salvation will you be told that a person can actually be guilty of a sin, which they did not actually commit. Further, every Calvinist would insist that Esau could be eternally damned for committing sins that he would never be able to prevent . . . or properly confess.

Calvinists would likely agree that God *could* foresee everyone's actual sins before they are committed. They would also teach that God could foresee any future repentance and faith before we are born. Yet the most sophisticated Calvinists do not teach that God's foreknowledge of our sins, or our faith, was used as the basis for electing some to salvation and leaving the rest as reprobate. They all agree that the fall was certainly foreseen, as this would be an unconditional election unto salvation for Jacob. Any prior salvation plan would obviously not be necessary if the fall was not foreseen by God. R.C. Sproul, in his Willing to Believe CD series, says:

When God does His electing, He always does it in the light of the fall.²

Dr. Sproul acknowledges that even in his system "unconditional election" was based on God's foreknowledge of, at least one of Jacob and Esau's "sins." In their system, God is basing His alleged damnation of Esau on His foreknowledge of Esau's "guilt" for the fall of Adam. The problem is that Paul is clear in Romans 9:11. Esau had not done anything evil when the decision was made to favor Jacob. To repeat, the *Apostle Paul* tells us that when the decision was made to pass by Esau (allegedly for salvation) he had not yet done anything to

deserve damnation. *Mr. Williamson* tells us that Esau did indeed deserve punishment at birth. Whom should we believe, G.I. Williamson or the Apostle Paul? One says Esau deserved to perish before he was born and the other says Esau had not sinned before he was born. My money is on the Apostle.

Again, Dr. Sproul and Mr. Williamson, like all Calvinists, are quite sure about the workings of God's omniscience in electing and condemning specific sinners. They assume that Esau was judged in the mind of God before he existed. He would be held guilty for the future fall of Adam. Most historical Calvinists teach that the only sin, which was foreseen by God, in Esau, which would be the basis for his reprobation, was his alleged role in the fall of Adam. Therefore, by not predestinating him to salvation, God would be leaving him to the punishment that he would deserve for his *future* role in the fall of man, in the Garden of Eden.

(You get a gold star if you can follow all this, and an adult Sunday School class in a Reformed Church if you can teach it. You get a bigger class if you can make it seem fair.)

Note: Paul does not mention the fall of man in Romans 9. There is no reference made to Esau's original sin in Romans 9. There is no mention of forgiveness or redemption in Romans 9. There is no mention of Jacob's faith or Esau's unbelief in Romans 9. Here, the doctrinal assumptions of the Calvinistic understanding are big leaps. I think this is where Augustine "nodded", if you know what I mean. This kind of mistake can happen when we are battling people like Pelagius. I suspect Pelagius was a royal pain in Augustine's . . . posterior.

In the Calvinistic understanding, this choice of Jacob over Esau is said to be "salvific." It includes eternal salvation. Our non-Calvinist says that this is not about salvation.

It is evident that some of the language in Romans 9 would seem to bolster the Calvinistic interpretation. The words, "hated," "harden" and "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" are used to describe Esau and/or Pharaoh. These are words, which we might assume would only be used in the context of eternal salvation. You can see how these texts *could* support the Calvinistic doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace. But it's not an airtight case. Words do have more than one meaning, and Paul does not use the most common terms for salvation in his explanation of this election.

Let's reiterate some important omissions from Romans 9. Paul does not explicitly state that Jacob will be forgiven of his sins and Esau will not be forgiven. The forgiveness of sins is not mentioned in the chapter. Romans 9 does not explicitly state that Jacob will be saved and Esau will be lost. The words "saved" and "salvation" are not used concerning Jacob and Esau. The terms "damned" or "reprobate" are not used in Romans 9. The term "justified" is not used in this chapter. Romans 9 does not explicitly state that Jacob will go to heaven and Esau will go to hell. Heaven and hell are not mentioned in Romans 9. Paul does not say that Jesus died for Jacob but not for Esau. The death of Christ is not specifically mentioned in Romans 9. Thus, we see how the Calvinist draws his understanding of Romans 9 by *inference*. Romans 9 could possibly be inferring that Jacob was chosen for salvation and Esau was left reprobate, but it is not clear or plain. The terms "love" and "hate" are used in different contexts in the Bible. They are not exclusively used in the context of salvation.

Don't give up. Nobody promised that this would be easy.

9.4 THIS ELECTION HAS NO KNOWN CONDITION

Whatever this election is unto . . . it was obviously not conditional upon anything that Jacob or Esau could have already done. The decision was made before they were born. God does not reveal His reason for choosing Jacob and rejecting Esau. If this choice was made based on something foreseen by God in the lives of Jacob and Esau, then God does not bother to reveal it through the biblical writers. Jacob was simply chosen by the sovereign decree of God, but this does not mean that God had no reason for the choice. It is hard to imagine that the real God would do anything without a reason. We don't need to be world-class scholars to conclude that the choice was not based on anything that they did *before* they were born.

Now, most Christians are confident that our eternal destinies have a true and meaningful condition. We know that the conditions are humble faith for everlasting life and stubborn unbelief for everlasting death. Jacob's future faith is not mentioned here. Likewise, if God is basing this rejection of Esau on his eventual sin or unbelief, He does not bother to explain it as such.

Also, Adam's sin is not mentioned as the reason that Esau would "be left to the punishment he *deserved*." **Here, Mr. Williamson's statements reveal the Calvinistic inconsistency.** In one statement, he says that Esau's eternal destiny was "not conditional" and then he says that Esau's eternal punishment was "deserved." Surely, you can see the contradiction.

The Calvinistic assumption that this is about salvation will leave us scratching our heads and trying to find a plausible explanation for the universal summons of the gospel to all men everywhere. We are instructed, as stewards and ambassadors of Christ, to offer the promise of salvation to all men everywhere . . . unto the uttermost parts of the world. We know that anyone will be saved if they repent and believe the good news. Mt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8; 17:30 We are not instructed to omit anyone from the commands of the gospel. We now know the answer to the mystery that was hidden until the advent of Christ: Salvation by grace through faith has been available to all nations and people throughout history. It is a false assumption that salvation was only intended, and only available, to the Jews prior to the coming of Christ.

As you undoubtedly know, many portions of the Bible surely appear to teach that God universally loves every fallen sinner. It is certainly clear that God has made an adequate provision, in the death of Christ, for the salvation of every baby ever born. It seems quite clear that God *wishes* the salvation of every sinner but He has not *decreed* the salvation of every sinner. It is logical, therefore, to conclude that there must be an independent condition, which adult sinners must meet in order to be saved. Otherwise, we make the Lord out to be suffering from some kind of mental disorder. Yet here, in Romans 9, it *might appear* that God did not want Esau (and possibly his descendants) to believe the truth, and be saved. The committed Calvinist, like many of the Jews in Jesus' day, assumes (and teaches) that God does not really want some sinners to love Him with all of their heart. If He did then He would give them a new heart.

Paul says here in Romans 9 that the boys had not done any good or evil before they were born. That sure makes sense to me, but it runs in opposition to the Westminster assertion that every person born *after* the fall is essentially guilty of the fall. This may seem strange but it is essential to orthodox Calvinism. It is evident that something isn't kosher

in the Calvinistic explanation. **Calvinists may be trying to protect grace from legalism, but it borders on blasphemy to assume that God would put Esau in eternal hell for the irresistible effects of something Adam did before Esau was born.** Indeed, we do need to be delivered from self-righteous Irish monks and self-aggrandizing Popes, but we must not correct error with error. The doctrine of irresistible salvation is an over correction of the doctrine of salvation by works . . . and faith plus works.

God made gravity and centrifugal force. He makes snowflakes. He designed the womb and the umbilical cord. It should not be hard for us to accept that He had His reasons for choosing Jacob over Esau . . . for something. But if this choice is concerning their eternal salvation then it would run contrary to a lot of other Scripture, and we must interpret Scripture in light of Scripture.

I hope you can also see that if this election of Jacob is about his salvation then it really renders any alleged “condition” of salvation absolutely perfunctory. Jacob did not meet any conditions in this election. Esau did not fail to meet any conditions in this election. Paul is going out of his way to show that this election of Jacob cannot be conditional upon Jacob’s obedience, repentance, or faith. God’s choice was made before Jacob could even make choices. Yet, we know with certainty, that the salvation of sinners is conditional upon repentance and faith in the truth. There is nothing more clearly taught in the Bible than humble faith as the condition of salvation for every culpable sinner.

It is safe to assume that God acts with good reason but He does not owe us an explanation for every decision He makes. His ways are higher than our ways and the Bible has proven itself too reliable to panic here. Paul only tells us that the choice of Jacob over Esau is so “the purpose of God according to election might stand.”

9.5 WHAT IS THE ELECTION UNTO?

The question may remain. “Elect to what? If this choice of Jacob over Esau was not about salvation then what was it? **This election is the unconditional election of Jacob unto patriarchal blessings within the covenant made with Abraham. It is not an unconditional election to personal salvation. Salvation has a condition.** (Note:

When I say “unconditional” here, I mean that it was not contingent upon anything that the twins had done prior to being born. It is possible that God based His choice on that which He foreknew about them and, perhaps, their descendants. That is not beyond the realm of possibility, but God does not offer that information to us in scripture.) This choice is about the election of Jacob, and his descendants, to be the chosen “people of God” with all of the earthly blessings and responsibilities pertaining thereunto. As a man, Jacob will be the patriarch of “Israel after the flesh.” 1 Cor 10:18; Rom 9:3-5 As a believer, he will also be a spiritual patriarch of all who will ever believe the truth, including both Jews and Gentiles. It is not one or the other. It is both. Rom 4:16-17; Rom 9:6b; Gal 3:7-9; 6:16; Heb. 11:21

God’s covenant with Abraham is much like the dual prophecies in the Old Testament, which had an earthly application to the contemporary Jewish people, and a spiritual, or Messianic, application to Jesus and the Church. This election of Jacob over Esau is in the context of that which is earthly and physical. The scope of this election includes blessings, which are personal for Jacob himself *and* national for his descendants, not one, or the other. Jacob *himself* will be blessed with extraordinary divine revelation, protection, patience, and responsibility. Jacob’s descendants, likewise, will know a level of divine revelation, protection, patience, and responsibility that no other nation in the history of the world will ever know. This helps explain why the Jews looked for signs and seemed less concerned with human reason. 1 Cor 1:22 The descendants of Jacob will witness the power of God like no other nation ever will. God will literally destroy people and nations that would oppose them. Exodus 34:10-11 (No doubt, this is one of the reasons that the Jews have been so hated throughout history. It has been well said that history never dies in the Middle East.)

One nation, which will always be subordinate to the Jews, will be the Edomites. They are the physical descendants of Esau. Esau himself did not receive the extraordinary blessings that Jacob received. The descendants of Esau will not be used, and blessed, like the children of Jacob. Jacob would father the 12 tribes of Israel, from which the Messiah would eventually come. Esau’s descendants would play no significant role in God’s plan of redemption. Jacob and his family stayed in Canaan. Esau and his family left for the mountains of Seir. A quick study of the Edomites in Scripture shows that they were often at

odds with Israel, but never prevailed. In the Old Testament record, we see that the Edomites became David's servants. This shows that even in a national sense, the older served the younger. Gen 25:23; Rom 9:12; 2 Sam 8:14; Num 24:18; 1 Kings 11:15; 1 Chron 18:13.

Jacob's descendants will enjoy the benefits of the 10 Commandments and many other laws that will help them flourish in hostile environments. They will be given the land promised to Abraham as their own; God will often work miraculously to help them conquer and protect it. Jacob (soon to be renamed Israel) did not do anything (good or bad) to deserve being the patriarchal namesake of God's chosen people. All of this blessing is given to Jacob and his descendants in spite of their frequent and serious failures. God shows a tremendous amount of loving patience with His adulterous chosen people; it is a remarkable proof of His faithfulness. God was faithful to His promise even when the Jews were unfaithful.

This election, in and of itself, appears to be unconditional, but other aspects of the covenant will be conditional upon Israel's obedience. Paul explains in Romans 10 and 11 that Israel, as a nation, will fail to be faithful. They will be judged as a covenant breaking people. Yet, there is still eternal hope for any individual Israelites who will embrace the truth, as it is best revealed in the gospel of Christ. Their national failure does not eliminate them from individual hope in Christ. Like everyone else in all the nations of the earth (including Esau and the Edomites), they have no eternal hope without Christ. Their privileges as the ethnic children of Israel do not automatically include everlasting forgiveness. This is why Paul prays for their salvation. This choice of Jacob over Esau is not unto eternal forgiveness but it's not small potatoes either. It is the fulfillment of the earthly blessings promised to Abraham.

We will not take the time to review the episode in Genesis 27 where Jacob managed to snatch the blessing that would normally go to the firstborn, Esau. The account might make for an interesting storyline in a movie. It is clear that the blessings pronounced on Jacob were *earthly* in nature. There is nothing in the wording of Isaac's blessings, which could reasonably be interpreted as, "Jacob was chosen to eternal life and Esau was left to the punishment he deserved." The blessings of the dew of heaven, the fatness of the earth, grain, wine, and the Promised Land are all great, but they should not be confused with the

spiritual blessings, in the heavenlies, that come with personal salvation.
Eph 1:1-11

9.6 GOD'S "HATRED" FOR ESAU

But why does God say that He hated Esau? Again, this verse in Romans 9 is a New Testament quote of the Old Testament prophet Malachi. Mal 1:2-3 (Remember, Esau was already dead when this prophecy was originally made, and Malachi explained it in a *national* context. Therefore, the Calvinist can only infer that it should be applied to Esau himself.) Would God really hate Esau, personally, in the sense that we generally use the term? We know that kids, and sometimes adults, often throw around the term "hate" in a very superficial sense. Some people might say they hate a certain vegetable or an obnoxious genre of music. People use the word very loosely sometimes, but this is God, saying it once, and then repeating it, about a named person and/or his descendants. Understandably, it raises some questions for those on both sides of the debate over election.

We understand that God hates all workers of iniquity. The Bible says so in Psalm 5:4-6. The Psalm speaks of the boastful, bloodthirsty, and deceitful. David says the Lord abhors them. "He takes no pleasure in wickedness." Also in Psalm 11, David says that God's soul hates the one who loves violence. Ps. 11:5 The prophet Hosea said that God hated Ephraim for their wickedness, *yet they were Jews*, His beloved and chosen people. Hos 9:15 We may recoil at this strong, and seemingly contradictory, language in the Bible . . . but we shouldn't. If God is holy and loves righteousness then it is expected that He would get angry at sin. It makes sense that He would punish those who love sin and practice it without remorse. Sin stinks to God and it should stink to us. If we really love that which is good then we will also hate evil.

But how can God hate a person who has not yet done any good or evil? This might make more sense if God's hatred of Esau was based upon His divine foreknowledge of Esau's future sins, but Calvinists typically deny this interpretation. This "hatred" of Esau is prior to his doing any evil. This does qualify the verse as a difficult text for both sides of our debate. This also makes it very unlikely that this word "hated" is used in a salvific sense. When God sentences people to hell it is most reasonable, and biblical, to think that it will be for

their unbelief and subsequent sins. Hell is a place of punishment, and Paul is saying that Esau had not done anything worthy of punishment before he was born. Therefore, Jacob's election and Esau's rejection *cannot be in the context of eternal life*. Paul tells us that this unconditional choice of Jacob took place so "that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls." Rom 9:11

Paul had said in Romans 3:4 that God will be found true and every man a liar. In Revelation 21:8, we see that all liars are included in the group that will have their part in the lake of fire, which is the second death. Jacob was a pro in the business of deception. He could teach a college course on lying. It seems that God might hate Jacob, since he took guile to an art form. Now Esau does come across in scripture as something of a carnal buffoon; but Jacob, the conniving little momma's boy, was no Eagle Scout. We must remember that this "love" and "hatred" was not based upon anything the boys had done. There is no undeniable reason to assume that this election is in the context of salvation. Jacob's faith would eventually shine and he will be remembered for it in Hebrews 11. Esau is not remembered for his faith but he does seem to acquiesce eventually to God's plan in all of this. We are given the impression that he finally forgave his brother, which would take some humble faith. Gen 33

(Note: There may be a breed of Calvinists who *would* teach that God is passing over Esau based upon His divine foreknowledge of Esau's impenitent unbelief. They do not hold to the historical Calvinistic view concerning the imputation of Adam's guilt. Some may suggest that Jacob was chosen to be saved based on God's foreknowledge of his humble faith. That could be possible, but Romans 9 should not be used to support that position. It says nothing about future sins, unbelief, or faith. The election described in Romans 9 is not about salvation. It is about the earthly blessings, privileges, and responsibilities for Jacob and his physical descendants.)

But why the term "hated?"

(This is where some Calvinists may go delving needlessly into speculation as to whether God somehow hated Jacob *before* He decided to extend His salvific love to him. They may also speculate as to whether God loved Esau before He decided to hate him. When I

got this deep into the Calvinistic error, I began to realize that I was off the map. It was time to turn around, go back, and see where I made a wrong turn.)

Based on what we know of God through Scripture and Creation, it is virtually impossible to conclude that the LORD does anything without a reason . . . let alone damn someone to hell. The biblical pictures, elsewhere in Scripture, of those who will be sentenced to hell always give a reason for their damnation, and it is never said to be the fall of Adam. Sinners get damned the old fashioned way . . . they earn it. Esau had not done anything wrong when the decision was made to “hate” him. Therefore, it is quite reasonable to think that this is not about Esau’s damnation. It must be regarding something else. It must be in a different context.

If we go back to the text in Malachi, which Paul is quoting, we can get a feel for the context of the original statement: “But Esau I have hated.” Remember again, this prophecy was made centuries after Jacob and Esau had died. In Malachi, the prophet is responding to those Jews who had come to doubt their status as God’s “beloved” people. God is answering the unwarranted accusation that He does not love the descendants of Jacob. They didn’t think that God had been treating them very well and the prophet is setting them straight. The context of the original prophecy in Malachi is clearly “national.” It is not about individuals. Note also, this is all in the plural. Thus, it is national . . . not individual. God had set His love on the nation of Israel in a very unique way. But it was not necessarily a salvific love.

Malachi’s prophecy is not talking about anyone’s eternal salvation. Malachi is showing how God has not allowed the descendants of Esau to prosper as a nation. This is the context of God’s “hated” for the Edomites. It is in comparison to His national blessing of the Jews. God is making sure that nobody mistakes the Edomites as His chosen people, even though they were descendants of Abraham through Isaac. God was also exposing the Jews’ ingratitude and disobedience.

Also, it is important to note here in Romans 9, that the word translated “hate” is not always used in the sense of eternal condemnation. In fact, it is *never* used in the context of eternal condemnation. We are told that the Greek word translated “hate” here is pronounced [mis eh o]. It is used over 40 times in the New Testament. Most all of those usages are referring to hatred by men in one sense or another. It is often used to

describe the hatred of the world for believers. The only other time in the New Testament that God is said to hate something is the sin of the Nicolaitans in Revelation 2. Likewise, in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for hate is often used in the sense of men who hate one another, or it is used to describe specific sins, which God hates, especially any form of idolatry.

The only places in Scripture where God is said to hate a named person are these two, which name Esau. Now, I'll freely admit that this is not a desirable distinction, but these are still not in the context of salvation. The Malachi text quoted by Paul in Romans 9 says,

"I have loved you," says the Lord. "Yet you say, 'In what way have you loved us?' Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" Says the Lord. "Yet Jacob I have loved; But Esau I have hated, and laid waste his mountains and his heritage for the jackals of the wilderness." Even though Edom has said, "We have been impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places," Thus says the Lord of hosts: "They may build but I will throw down; They shall be called the Territory of Wickedness, and the people against whom the Lord will have indignation forever. Mal 1:2-3

We see how the prophet is answering Israel's doubt that God loves them. They are beginning to think that God must love other wicked nations more than He loves them. They have suffered through a lot, even though much of their trouble was self-inflicted. They are asking God to explain how He loves them. It is a brazen accusation, which is met with typical patience from God. God answers by pointing out His care for them as compared to the Edomites. Here again, we see that God is using the terms love and hate in an earthly and national context. All of this is in the context of buildings and territory . . . not faith and forgiveness.

This “hatred” is defined in terms of earthly blessings not eternal wrath. The indignation, which God says he will have “forever” on the Edomites, is not in the context of everlasting destruction in hell. Remember, sometimes words have two meanings. “Forever” here is meant in a temporal and national sense. Under the sun, if you will. The Edomites will never be materially blessed in the way that the descendants of Jacob will. It does not mean they cannot, individually, repent and be forgiven of their sin. Even if the Edomites were to

repent, and be saved, God would still not bless them as a nation. We are not told that Jesus is the propitiation for the whole world except for the descendants of Esau.

This “hate” cannot mean what the Calvinists claim. This is the language of an *exaggerated contrast*. It is not the only one in the Bible. God’s love and commitment to Jacob (that is Israel) is so strong compared to any other nation in history, including the nation that will come from Isaac’s other son; it would seem to be hatred. It is not hatred in an eternal and spiritual sense. It is used in a limited earthly context. The word “hate” is used in a similar way by Jesus in Luke 14:26:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes his own life also he cannot be my disciple.

God hated Esau in a sense that is similar to the way we are to hate our families by comparison with our love for Christ. Most of you know already, this is not a contradiction to the other texts in Scripture, which clearly instruct us to love our families. It is hyperbole that is used to make a very important point. The point is that there are no happy promises for those who seek *second* the Kingdom of God. Family before Christ is idol worship and it is a very common form of idolatry. Many traditions are cleverly disguised forms of ancestor worship. This kind of “disordered love” is easy to fall into because Scripture does command us to honor our parents and love our families. In spite of the fall, it is natural to love our own families.

Biblically, there is a sense in which we are to hate our own lives, and there is a sense in which we are to love our own lives. We hate our lives in the sense of denying our selfishness and lusts. Also, we prefer to die and be with Christ which is far better than this life. Phil 1:23 Yet, we also love our own life as it is the gift of God. We are commanded to love our neighbors *as ourselves . . .* not instead of ourselves. There is no contradiction when we understand the context in which the words are used.

If we conclude that this hatred of Esau is in the context of his eternal reprobation then we are going to have to rethink how we interpret other scripture. For example, what would that kind of interpretation do with the following words of Jesus to Peter?

Get behind me Satan, you are an offense to me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men Mt 16:23

If we isolated this reproof of Peter then we could erroneously conclude that Peter is reprobate since Jesus called him Satan, and accused him of being carnally minded, which is death. Rom 8:6 Likewise, if we look only at Peter's passionate denials of Christ then we would not think that Peter was a true believer, but we would be wrong. When we take into consideration all that Scripture says about Peter, we are easily set straight. We must do the same thing here with Esau and the Edomites.

9.7 THE POTTER'S RIGHTS OVER THE CLAY

If we look at the Old Testament record and continue reading chapters 10 and 11 in Romans, we will get the correct understanding of this “hatred” of Esau. Esau is not being punished for anything he did *before he was born*. It is stated clearly that he had not done anything wrong before he was born. He is simply not being chosen for the extraordinary blessings given to Jacob and his descendants. If God wants to withhold blessing from someone, and his posterity, then He has the right. It does not necessarily mean they have done something worthy of punishment . . . yet. God did not break any promises in this rejection of Esau and his descendants. We should not “find fault” when God chooses to exercise His sovereign rule over us. He is the Potter and we are the clay.

We saw the same lesson earlier in John 9. This is where Jesus taught that the man born blind was not born with his handicap because of his sin, or the sin of his parents. The man was born blind “that the works of God should be revealed in him.” This is a cursed world and we are not intended to live in it forever, without pain and suffering. No promises were broken to the man born blind. Old age and death will take us all soon enough. In eternity, it will make little difference who enjoyed 80 years of relative health and prosperity, and who endured 80 years of relative misery. **We must get a firm grasp on the biblical truth that this life is not all there is to life, and God is not under any moral obligation to create (or treat) every person exactly the same.**

We know that John the Baptist was chosen for a very particular ministry before he was even born. His very conception was extraordinary. God gave him his name. John “leaped” in his mother’s womb when she was in the presence of Mary while she was carrying Jesus in her womb. It is doubtful that John knew what he was doing in his mother’s womb. We might be tempted to assume that John the Baptist was irresistibly predetermined to be a believer, and there was nothing he could do about it. We might be tempted to believe that John had no liberty of choice regarding his faith, but we do not have to come to that conclusion. John was certainly unique among men. Jesus called him the greatest born of women, but this does not mean that God forced him to be a believer or a prophet. God could have used his foreknowledge of John’s free choices (and His own divine plans) in ordaining his role in the Kingdom. The same would be true of Paul, who said that he was separated from his mother’s womb. We see the same thing in Jeremiah’s life. Luke 1:41; Gal 1:15; Jer 1:5 These are extraordinary cases, as these men were called to extraordinary tasks. It is not normative for every believer.

Neither Esau nor his descendants were being eternally punished for “their” fall in Adam. They were simply not given the extraordinary earthly blessings given to Jacob and his descendants. No nation has been blessed like the nation of Israel. Other nations have been more prosperous and powerful, but no nation has ever been adopted by God like the natural descendants of Jacob.

We see the same thing taught in the parables. God decides who gets many “talents” and who gets few. The Master can pay one man a “denari” for a full days work, and pay another man a “denari” for one hour of work. Mt 20:1-16 It is God’s right to do what He wants with that which is His, as long as He does not violate His holy character. He never does. No promises were broken. No covenants were violated. There is no fault in God for dispensing His grace as He sees fit. Nevertheless, we must agree that God could not make an unconditional promise of blessing to Esau and then break it. Likewise, God could not make a conditional promise to Esau if He never intended to keep His end of the deal. That would be dishonest.

The Potter was using the Israelites as a “vessel” for a great and glorious purpose. That purpose would eventually prove to be the Hope of the very nations and tribes that He *appeared* to despise. If

any individual Edomites, Ammonites, Moabites, or any nations of the earth are found in heaven then they will be very grateful that God was so singularly devoted to the Israelites. Whether they liked them or not they needed the Savior that God brought to the world through the Jews.

9.8 WAS ESAU A “COVENANT CHILD?”

As a worthwhile side note, it should be pointed out that the alleged reprobation of Esau will shoot a hole in the side of the common Reformed hope, which teaches that all *infants* of true believers are somehow in a secure position regarding their salvation. When Esau was an infant he would not have been elect; therefore he could not have been in a sanctified state of grace . . . in their system. He would have been born dead in sin and reprobate from birth. If he had died as a child he would have gone to hell. Isaac was a true believer but his firstborn son would be toast. Remember, according to the Reformed view, Esau would have been a vessel of wrath fit for eternal damnation, from the womb. If he were reprobate, it would not have mattered if he died as an infant or as an old man.

Esau was the firstborn of Isaac, who was Abraham’s miraculous “child of promise.” Esau was the grandson of Abraham himself. If God did not elect Esau to salvation then it would be willfully naïve to assume that the children of believers, throughout history, should have any more hope of being chosen than the children of unbelievers. The “hard shell” view would be the most logical position for a wannabe Calvinist, if you know what I mean.

It makes more sense to understand this election as God rejecting Esau for the extraordinary blessing of being a patriarch of His chosen people. Esau and his descendants were not the people that God used to keep His promise to Abraham, show His mighty power, and bring the Messiah. God did not commit the Scriptures to Esau’s descendants or give them the Promised Land. They never saw the miraculous victories and deliverances that Jacob and his descendants experienced. They received no manna from heaven. They were not led by the cloud and pillar of fire. No Red Sea deliverance. No walls of Jericho. No King like David. No wisdom of Solomon. No Solomon’s Temple. No prophets and prophecies. Esau was close to it all, but as

a weekend golfer might say on the putting green, “Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.” God’s chosen people will never be referred to as the “people of Esau” but the Edomites could still be justified by faith. Contrite faith. The kind you don’t brag about.

9.9 IS THIS ELECTION UNRIGHTEOUS OF GOD?

What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! Rom 9:14

It is safe to say that Esau took it pretty hard as God’s decision to bless Jacob (and his posterity) unfolded. He knew the firstborn traditionally enjoyed a privileged position. He assumed that Jacob was getting the gold mine and he was getting the shaft. Nevertheless, we can infer from his reaction that he certainly was not aware that this was about the eternal salvation of his soul. He was bitter because of the perceived material losses and injury to his pride. Therefore, he tries to squeeze out some kind of consolation prize of a blessing from Isaac. Perhaps he thought there was unrighteousness with God. Paul anticipates that we may be tempted to think the same thing. Thus, he proceeds to defend God’s right to be God.

Most men and women are not given great wealth, power, fame, or influence. It is easy to think that it is unfair for God to favor some over others, even in material things. We get our noses bent out of shape when our neighbor, brother, or sister gets a better car or house. How many women in the world deal with serious bitterness and anxiety because they do not think they were born as pretty as someone else? But we must never forget that unto whom much is given . . . much is required, and the Potter decides how to use the clay. Regardless of whether God gives us one “talent” or one hundred, we are to be faithful and leave the outcome to Him. Faithfulness *is* success in the kingdom of God. It’s not about being better than the next guy. We don’t have to beat everyone else in the race. We just have to finish our own race.

Also, it would not be hard to find, among the Jewish people, some who will testify that being God’s chosen people is not as wonderful as one might think. This is understandable. One would be hard pressed to find any other ethnic group that has been so despised by men, and chastened by God, for so long. We must remember, in this election

of Jacob over Esau, that no promises of God were broken. God did not promise that *every* descendant of Abraham would enjoy the unconditional blessings promised to Abraham. God has made no promise that His treatment of all nations, families, or individuals will be completely equal in every sense.

Think for a minute what that would require. We would all need to have identical genetics in physical, mental, and creative capabilities. We would need to have identical circumstances and influences in every aspect of our lives, including the spiritual. It would be a cookie cutter world. Instead, we can enjoy all the different gifts, abilities, vocations, personalities, and circumstances of life that make each one of us unique, and still be confident that God's final judgment of us will be perfectly just. Our final judgment will be appropriately based upon what we have done with what we have been given. Proper judgment is a very complex thing and that is why God is the only one qualified for the job. He knows every circumstance and motive for every human thought, word, and deed. Therefore, His judgments are perfect and trustworthy. Dt 32:4; Isa 61:8

There is no unrighteousness with God in this election of Jacob over Esau. God can do what He wants with that which is His. Jacob will be judged based on what God gave to him, as will Esau. They don't have to be made exactly the same and experience identical circumstances to receive a just judgment from God.

9.10 I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOMEVER I WILL HAVE MERCY

Romans 9:15-18

For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.” So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.” Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.

We should take the time to examine these words. Again, Paul is quoting from the Old Testament. The statement, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion” may sound like it is speaking exclusively of salvation, but not necessarily. The word “mercy” is used in various contexts in Scripture. It is not always in the context of eternal forgiveness. When we examine the context of the verse that Paul is quoting, in Exodus 33, we see that it was not originally said in the context of eternal salvation. It is in the context of an extraordinary earthly favor.

Exodus 33 gives us the remarkable account of Moses getting to see the “back” of God’s glory/goodness. Moses’ salvation is not the subject of this text. The scene in Exodus is not about Moses being elect unto salvation; it is about Moses receiving a tremendous individual blessing. God is doing Moses a huge divine favor, but it has nothing to do with his forgiveness. Moses was getting to “see” God in a very unique experience. Likewise, Jacob was given a great earthly favor in his election over Esau. God is under no obligation to bestow these extraordinary “mercies” to everyone. He can sovereignly dispense his mercy and grace, as He deems wise. In verses 17-20 of Exodus 33 we read:

So the Lord said to Moses, “I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name.” And he said, “Please show me Your glory.” Then He said, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion whom I will have compassion.” But He said, “You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.”

The word, which is translated “compassion” in Romans 9:15 is only used these two times in the New Testament. Thus, we can’t compare it to any other biblical contexts. The word [el eh eh o] that is translated “mercy” is used in various contexts in the New Testament. It is used in the context of physical healing and demon exorcism. It is also used in the context of the forgiveness of debt and the forgiveness of sin. For reasons that I could not be sure of, the translators of the New King James translate the Hebrew in Exodus 33 as “gracious” and the same

text here in Romans 9 as “mercy.” I think our English word “gracious” is the better choice in both cases. Since it is describing the same event, it should be the same word, and it fits the context in Romans 9. (Perhaps Bible translators can be affected by their own personal convictions. I’m no scholar, but I have a hunch that some Bible translators may lean toward Calvinism and some may lean away from it.)

Nevertheless, the pertinent point here is that “mercy” is not a word, which is only used in the context of salvation. In our modern English, we rarely use the word mercy. When we do, we tend to think of it in terms of withholding some kind of due punishment. But mercy can be used to describe an undeserved favor as well. Paul used this word [el eh eh o] in 1Corinthians 7:25 when he was describing the divine trust he was given as an apostle. It is translated as “mercy” where we might use the term “grace” today. Paul’s apostleship was an unmerited favor but it would not necessarily be understood as withholding punishment or wrath.

The same is true of the two Hebrew words translated “gracious” and “compassion” that Paul is quoting from in Exodus 33. In Genesis 33:5 Jacob used the word translated “gracious” to describe the material blessings of livestock that he had received from the Lord. It was out of God’s bountiful blessing that Jacob offered to Esau when they finally met again. Jacob feared for his life and thought he should bring some gifts for the brother who he tricked out of great blessing. The word (gracious) is not used in a salvific context. Also, David used the same word in Psalm 51:1 when he was pleading for mercy after committing his big sins in the disastrous episode with Bathsheba. It is a word used in both the material and spiritual contexts. The same is true of the word translated “compassion” in Exodus 33. It is used most often in the Old Testament in the context of God having compassion on the Jews in their waywardness and captivity.

In the Church today we tend to use the words grace, mercy, and compassion almost exclusively in the context of salvation, but it is not so in the original languages of Scripture. The words “mercy” and “compassion” in Romans 9 are not speaking of eternal salvation.

Again, an important point is being made in all of this. God can dispense His grace as He sees fit. **He does not have to do for all what He does for one, unless He promises that He would.** God must act as His holy, just, and good character dictates . . . and He

always does. No promises were broken to anyone in these exclusive and gracious favors done for Jacob and Moses. Yet, and again, we know that unto whom much is given . . . much is required. This applies even to Moses. He did not get to cross over into the Promised Land because of his trespass, in the Wilderness of Zin. Deut. 32

There is some biblical evidence that Esau may have been a saved man. If genuine forgiveness is a fruit of the spirit (and it surely is) then Esau gets the benefit of the doubt in my mind. Any man who can forgive his family for such betrayal must know something of the grace of God in his own heart. It appears that Esau did finally acquiesce to the providence of God and accept his role as something of an outcast in his own family. Gen. 33 I would not be surprised if he shows up in heaven enjoying the God who he thought had allowed him to be cheated out of his inheritance.

Esau and his descendants did not enjoy the privileges, or responsibilities, of being God's chosen people. They were not elect in this context, but neither were the Philistines, Canaanites, Hittites, Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Anglo-Saxon, Asian, Hispanic, or Comanche. God can do what He wants with us as long as He does not violate His holy character. This is why we are told to pray: "Thy will be done . . ."

So the "it" in Romans 9:16 is not eternal salvation as the Calvinists would say, but "it" is the unconditional election of Jacob and his descendants to carry on the line of God's chosen people. They will enjoy the earthly aspects of the promise to Abraham. Jacob did not will "it" or run after "it." It was "not of works but of Him who calls." He wasn't even born when God decided to give "it" to him. "It" was given by sovereign decree. "It" was a profound privilege, but "it" surely was not all cake and ice cream. If "it" were salvation by being Jewish, then Paul would not be so concerned and praying for the salvation of his fellow Jews. They would already be saved by virtue of their union with Jacob. **He is showing that, even for the Jews, spiritual union with Christ saves, not physical union with Israel.** It is urgent that they understand this. He already touched on it in Romans 2:28-29 where he said,

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and

circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

It is imperative that the Jews understand the reason behind Paul's prayer for their salvation. Paul is devoting much of his letter to the topic. He reinforces this elsewhere in the New Testament. Gal 3:26-29; 1 Cor 12:12-13; Col 3:10-11

9.11 SALVATION INVOLVES WILLING AND RUNNING—JACOB'S ELECTION DID NOT

Another very important reason to shun the view that Romans 9 is about Jacob's election to salvation is that salvation requires a condition to be met. A human choice must be made and supported by our actions. In this situation, Jacob did not choose to be the earthly heir of the promise to Abraham. He did not run after (or campaign) for this election. It came to him passively. He did not hunger for it, strive for it, or seek it in any way. He did not count the cost of being chosen for it. It was not conditional upon his confession of sin or his faith. This was an unconditional and irresistible election. This is how we know that Paul is *not* speaking about Jacob's personal salvation. Biblical salvation has a requirement.

We are required to confess our sin in order to be forgiven. We hunger and thirst for righteousness. We "will" to be saved. We "run" after salvation, in the sense that we actively respond to the conviction of sin. The timeless law is written on our hearts and it urges us to action. We respond to the universal summons to repent. Just like Bunyan's pilgrim, the law exposes the heavy burden of our sin and we "want" to be rid of it. Luke 18:13 We *run* the race of faith that is set before us. Heb 12:1 We *labor* for the food, which endures to everlasting life. John 6:27 We must enter through the narrow/difficult gate. Mt 7:13 We build our house upon the Rock. Mt 7:24-25 We *fight* the good fight of faith and lay hold on eternal life. 1 Tim 6:12 We seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. Mt 6:33 We *humble ourselves* and draw near to God. James 4:8,10 We must hold fast the preached word, lest we believe in vain. 1 Cor 15:2 We must lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save our souls James 1:21

Biblical salvation is not merely done *to us* without any condition. There is a true condition, which must be met via the common grace of God. The condition is not perfect (or partial) obedience to the law. The condition is found in the “law of faith” and that is why boasting is excluded. [Rom 3:27](#) God does not repent or believe for us. There is no text of Scripture, which clearly teaches that God imposes the ability to repent and believe on the elect. Not one. It is another inference of the Reformed system.

This is a hole into which much of the Evangelical Church has fallen; and Calvinists have pointed the way into it. They have done so by teaching that salvation essentially comes passively (monergistically, if you like) without willing it and without running after it. The election of Jacob to be a patriarch of God’s chosen people was God’s business alone. Indeed, Jacob had nothing to do with that choice, but it was not salvific. Likewise, if Esau perishes it will not be because God refused to elect him as a physical heir to the earthly aspects of the covenant with Abraham. If Esau perishes, it will be for his impenitent sin and unbelief . . . like anyone else. The same is true of Ishmael who was Abraham’s first child.

Scripture does not say that the just shall live by “unconditional election.” It says the just shall live by their faith and that is a bona fide condition.

9.12 DOES HE STILL FIND FAULT?

Romans 9:19-24

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will? But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

We continue in the very heart of the Calvinistic defense of their system. Any (and all) debates on the subject of Calvinistic predestination will inevitably end up here. Paul repeats a persistent human objection to God's sovereignty and to His justice. The objection is simple and goes like this: "God's not fair." We should stick to the inspired language of Scripture as much as possible:

Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?

Paul has introduced God's use of Pharaoh into the discussion. The objection might go like this: If God "raised up" Pharaoh to show His power through the plagues and Red Sea deliverance, then how could He hold him accountable for his stubborn and sinful disobedience? Apparently, God "wanted" him to be hard hearted. Paul does not bother with a detailed defense of how it could be fair for God to hold Pharaoh accountable for that which He planned for (or ordained) him to do. Apparently, Paul thinks we should be able to figure it out, or at least trust God's evident wisdom. After all, He did lay the foundations of the earth . . . and make lightning . . . and eagles. He made trees that would provide shade in the summer and sunlight in the winter. God is awfully smart; maybe He really does know what He is doing.

If we are going to venture into an explanation of this then we should learn from other places in Scripture where God appears to do the same thing. Here we must remember one very important word from our earlier discussions. The word is *concurrence*. (Section 3.4, Pg 35)

Just as we noted in the examples of Job's enemies and Joseph's brothers, Pharaoh meant his actions for evil, and God meant them for good. God can hold Pharaoh accountable for his actions because God did not directly cause Pharaoh to sin. He providentially ordained that Pharaoh would be the King of Egypt at this time. God used Pharaoh's arrogance to show His power and perform a great deliverance for the Jews. The Jewish nation would eventually provide the nation of Egypt with their Hope of eternal salvation. Pharaoh's sin will be worked together for good to those who love God and are the called according to His purpose. Rom 8:28 God is saying that He raised up Pharaoh in the same sense that He took responsibility for permitting the Sabeans and Chaldeans to attack Job. The same principle was at work when

God ordained (or permitted) Joseph's envious brothers to treat him so poorly.

God uses this language of divine responsibility because He does have all power. Nothing can occur without God's directly causing it, or indirectly permitting it to happen. He could stop every sin if He wanted to, but He obviously does not want to. God is wise enough to accomplish His righteous plans through the free choices of lowly peasants and powerful kings. Now, thanks to the Light of Jesus Christ, and the writings of His apostles, we know one of God's motives for allowing sin into His creation. He permits sin so that we all can know, *by experience*, the height, depth, and breadth of His love. Eph 3:17-19

If this language of divine "responsibility" were not used with Pharaoh then we might come to the false conclusion that God is not all-powerful, or He is not wise and good. We might be tempted to assume that the world is out of His control or that men rule over God. These are fundamental mistakes. This is what agnostics, open theists, and other skeptics have concluded about God. They see all the evil and the pain it causes. Then they make the false assumption that there must not be a God, or that He must not be holy, all-powerful, benevolent, or wise.

Unbelievers of every tongue and creed assume that since this life is all they can see . . . then this life must be all that there is. This is at the essence of unbelief. It may look pretty smart when it is wrapped in academic and scientific language, but it is still foolish. They draw their conclusions without faith in the eternal. They draw their conclusions by willfully ignoring the invisible attributes of God, which are clearly seen in the things He has made. Rom 1:20 This is why they should be called "unbelievers" even if they go to church or teach in seminary.

If the scientific study of the cosmos tells us anything, then it tells us that Someone must have designed and created all this wondrous matter. Thus, the Creator must transcend life, as we understand it. Creation tells us that God must be spiritual in nature and self-existent. It tells us that His brilliance and power simply cannot be fully comprehended. In addition, the historical event of the cross of Christ proves, beyond any reasonable doubt, that God loves His creatures and hates their sin.

We must never attempt to pass judgment on God's justice without seeing the big picture through the eyes of faith. God can, and will,

find fault with every culpable sinner, just as He did with Adam and Eve. God created them and anticipated their fall, but He did not cause them to fall. It was not His will for them to sin in the moral sense. He disapproved of their disobedience but chose to permit it to occur. The same is true here in Romans 9 with Pharaoh. God raised him up to be king but He did not make him sin. God used Pharaoh's sin to accomplish a great redemptive purpose.

Men who attain much power are rarely willing to relinquish it, even in part. God is not a man and we can be thankful about that in many regards. God's "ordained will" would be the appropriate sense in which He "raised up" Pharaoh to be a vessel of wrath. Again, a major lesson in Romans 9 is that God does not have to do for one person that which He may do for another . . . unless He promises to.

9.13 WHY DOES GOD FIND FAULT WITH ANY SINNER?

In the episodes of Pharaoh, Job's enemies, Joseph's brothers, Adam's transgression, and those who crucified Jesus we might also be tempted to ask, "Why does He still find fault. For who has resisted His will?" If God "wanted" those sinful events to take place then why would He judge the sinners who brought them about? In fact, why stop with just those few examples? Shouldn't every one be able to point their finger at God if He holds us accountable for our sin? After all, we can't help being born with a sinful nature. If our sin is not God's fault then surely it is Adam's fault. Why doesn't God just punish Adam and leave the rest of us alone?

This is one of the most devastating effects of true Calvinism. We have seen where Westminster says that fallen man is "utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil . . ." (Chapter 6, Section 4)³ The Heidelberg Catechism says we are so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, except we are regenerated.⁴ I'm sure the Devil would love us to believe that we can't prevent our sin; therefore, God could not justly condemn us for it. Mankind has always made this excuse and secular science is now a willing accomplice. Some "professionals" diagnose virtually all sinful behavior as sickness. We think we have found the loophole through which sin may be excused; therefore, we do not need to face the humiliation of confession, or the final judgment. I would not be

surprised if science soon claims to have found a defective gene for virtually every sin and vice known to man. (Then the pharmaceutical companies will come up with a pill for each one. Then the nutritional people will come up with a “natural” alternative. They will offer a vitamin to help us control our lust, covetousness, and pride.)

The Devil would also like us to believe that we can't even confess our sin and repent. This may be Satan's most effective tactic for getting sinners to despair and doubt the perfect character of God. The Devil wants us to doubt God's common grace and His universal love. Calvinism supports the lie by claiming that every lost sinner is left utterly without any effective power against sin and unbelief. The Calvinistic doctrine of original sin (without an effective common grace) is a roadmap to despair. This is especially true for those who struggle with sin and fear they may be reprobate.

This is one reason why Paul bristles at the anticipated objection. He answers sharply because the integrity of God is at stake. Calvinists essentially agree that since the fall, there is no such thing as a preventable sin for the unregenerate. There is no common divine help, or hope, for the reprobate. They were born lost in sin and God does not want to help them. Calvinists teach that God will drop the hammer of His wrath on multitudes that were refused the very ability to repent, *in spite of the command to repent*. If that seems fair to you then you will make a fine Calvinist. (However, you will need to learn how to hide behind some technical philosophical distinctions in order to obscure your fatalism.)

If you can read these words then you know in your heart that you have sinned willfully on countless occasions, both before and after coming to faith in Christ. You also know that you could have prevented the sin. If you have ever successfully resisted a temptation then you proved that God gave you the ability to resist. This does not go unnoticed by God. Your conscience excused you and so did God. But watch out, this also proves that you were not irresistibly compelled to sin because of your sinful nature. If our sin is not sincerely confessed then Christ's sacrifice will not be permanently applied to our account. Heb. 10:26 Sinners are called to be contrite as long as we are still in this mortal body.

Paul brought Pharaoh into the discussion but this same objection might be raised regarding Esau's being hated and passed over for

covenantal blessings. Esau may have been inclined to “reply against God” but the Lord will be vindicated in the exercise of His sovereignty. Esau may have wondered why God made him a “nobody” and his sneaky twin brother was to be the namesake of God’s chosen people for the rest of time. Some day he would understand that although he was not given as much as Jacob, He would not have the same expectations as Jacob. It should be acknowledged, that this objection might be raised in both the Calvinistic and non-Calvinistic interpretation of Jacob’s election and Esau’s rejection. Either way, if this is all about their eternal souls or earthly privileges, the accusation against God’s righteousness might be anticipated. It’s nothing new. Mankind has been pointing his puny little finger at God, calling Him unfair, since Adam blamed God for giving him Eve. Gen 3:12

The difference, of course, and the reason that the Calvinistic position would not be just is because there is a big difference between being passed over for extraordinary earthly blessing and being eternally condemned as the result of a sin that you did not commit. Esau was merely being passed over for patriarchal blessings. He will not be judged for failing to be chosen to continue the earthly line of the covenant with Abraham.

God does not promise to providentially raise up every man to be a king like Pharaoh, nor does He promise to make everyone a patriarch of His covenant with Abraham. He did not promise that every believer would be chosen as an Apostle. Likewise, He does not promise that everyone will be born with good health, sharp minds, and Hollywood good looks. Some people are born blind and some have exceptional eyesight into old age. Some babies are born into loving, disciplined, and wise Christian families. Some babies are born into sin-infested slums. Some babies get sold into slavery or tossed into dumpsters. Some have loving and devoted parents. Some are born into primitive tribes and poverty; some are born into high education and wealth. Some people are gifted musically and athletically, some are tone deaf and clumsy. The list could go on. The clay should not be arguing with the Potter.

However, God does promise eternal mercy to every sinner . . . if he/she meets a condition. The condition is humble faith. It would be dishonest of God to promise His mercy to any sinner if He has not made the necessary provision for that individual sinner. It would be dishonest of God to promise salvation to any sinner that He has no intention of saving. Pharaoh and his armies would not have drowned

in the Red Sea if they had simply obeyed God's command to let the people go.

If I may bluntly paraphrase this aspect of Romans 9, in the vernacular, it is telling us to quit whining, play the hand we are dealt, and leave the judging to God. We are told to trust the Lord based on what He has shown us, and that is more than enough evidence to prove His trustworthiness. We must leave the final judging to God. He is equipped for the job . . . we are not.

This helps us to understand what Jesus meant when He said that it would be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the Day of Judgment than it will be for the cities of Capernaum and Bethsaida. Mt 11:21 The cities of Tyre, Sidon, Sodom and Gomorrah did not have nearly as much light as those cities who saw the "Light of the World" when He walked among men. Jesus worked miracles and taught the wisdom that comes from God in Capernaum and Bethsaida. More will be expected of those who experienced Jesus, in person, than from those who lived in Sodom. More will be expected of the child raised in a loving Christian home than one brought up in a secular hedonistic home.

Some sinners will be used as vessels of great fame or honor and some sinners will live and die in obscurity. The "greatest" Christians alive today are not well known and probably never will be. They may be poor. They are probably being persecuted for their faith in some place where Christ is not honored. They don't care if they are famous. They don't need wealth to impress people or make a statement to those who doubted their potential. Their affections are set on things above, where Christ sits. Col 3:1 They don't need the praise of men therefore they do not seek it. They may be last in this life, but they will be first in the life to come. We look forward to meeting them and trust that their heavenly reward will be worth all of their pain and suffering.

9.14 FINDING FAULT WITH YOUR OWN CREATION

We notice that the text does not say, "Why does He still condemn?" or "Why does He still damn them to hell as reprobate?" Again, this is because Paul is not talking about salvation. He is not talking about the eternal reprobation of Esau, or even Pharaoh. We can learn much from what is not contained in Scripture, especially when we come to teachings that are difficult and more complex. God will find fault with

everyone. It surely does not mean that He will condemn everyone as impenitent unbelievers. **God is obviously not finding fault with Esau for not being chosen to directly participate in the covenant that He made with Abraham.** It was God's choice, alone. Again, Paul made it clear that God's choice of Jacob over Esau was not made based on anything they had done before birth. This should go without saying, but I'm glad he made it clear. We may rest assured that God will ultimately judge Pharaoh and Esau for that which they can be justly held responsible, and it won't be Adam's sin in the Garden.

Again, I know that a layman with a concordance can lead to trouble, but it should be noted that the Greek term translated "find fault" is used two other times in the New Testament, and neither are in the context of damnation. The word "criticized" might be a viable translation. God is just to find fault with Pharaoh because Pharaoh was not forced to be so wicked. God, in His providence, may have planned to use Pharaoh's arrogance, but God did not directly cause him to be a vainglorious tyrant. God does not even tempt men with sin. He certainly does not cause them to sin. James 1:13

Pharaoh, his armies, Esau, and the Edomites will be sinners and God will "find fault" with them for their sin. The question does not necessarily infer that God will find fault with Esau for not being chosen to fulfill the promises to Abraham. To repeat one more time, Paul makes it clear that the choice of Jacob over Esau was not based on their personal faith or obedience. There is no mention of anyone's faith, or lack of it, in these verses. If Paul were talking about their eternal destinies then he would be more explicit. He would be talking about their sin and/or unbelief.

If the Calvinistic interpretation is correct then Paul could have avoided this whole debate. If this was about salvation then he could have made the point explicitly clear. **This debate would have never existed if Paul had said plainly that Jacob was chosen for salvation and Esau and Pharaoh were not.** Paul is showing that God can do what He wants with our lives. He is not under any obligation to treat us all the same, unless He has promised to. God has every right to use impenitent sinners, or penitent sinners, to make His glory known.

If God ever *made* one man to be a sinner, in the sense that He directly causes his sin, then God could not be holy. He could still be viewed as sovereign, but not holy. So whatever this means about God

“making” a vessel for dishonor it cannot mean that He makes that vessel sin. It simply cannot.

Pharaoh was born in sin but that was Adam’s fault. Pharaoh was given God’s common grace and a lot of extraordinary grace to help restrain his sinful nature. He ignored his conscience. He ignored Moses. He ignored God’s supernatural warnings. Pharaoh was a hard sinner that God made harder by giving him so many opportunities to humble himself. This explains how Pharaoh could have been so arrogant, stubborn, and stupid. God permitted Pharaoh to do what he wanted. God used Pharaoh’s arrogance to accomplish a great purpose and there is no unrighteousness in that. God was not the direct cause of Pharaoh’s arrogance. Neither was Adam.

When Jesus spoke of the condemned, He gave reasons for their condemnation. Elsewhere, when scripture describes those nameless individuals who will perish in hell . . . it names their sins. Mt 18:6; Mt 25:43-46; 1Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-21; Rev 21:8 They were not forced to sin. They refused to humbly turn from their sins. Therefore, they must bear the guilt of them. If Paul was actually describing Esau’s or Pharaoh’s eternal damnation then I think He would make it abundantly clear.

Note also, the words that Paul chooses to use. He does not speak of *souls, hearts, or spirits* for honor or dishonor. He uses the term *vessel*, which is used in the New Testament for things that are physical. We are told that this term [skyoo’ os] was a common Greek metaphor for the body. It is not used to describe a soul, heart, or spirit. It is also used for containers, such as bowls and cups. The human body is something of a container for the soul. This would be consistent with the understanding that God uses men, in a temporal sense, to accomplish His will on earth. The election of Jacob and the rejection of Esau was in an earthly sense, not the eternal sense. The destruction of Pharaoh’s life does not necessarily mean he was reprobate in the Calvinistic sense.

9.15 COULD ESAU AND PHARAOH RESIST GOD’S WILL?

Question: Who has resisted His will? Rom 9:19

Answer #1: Satan, Adam, Eve, Noah, Job, the Sabeans and Chaldeans, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Joseph’s brothers, Joseph, Pharaoh, the

Egyptians, the Israelites including Moses, Peter, James, John, Saul of Tarsus, you, me, and a host of others. Everybody has resisted the will of God. Sin is transgression of the law. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There is none righteous.

Answer #2: Nobody. No person has ever resisted the decreed will of God in the sense of having sovereign rule over the Almighty.

In the moral sense, we have all resisted His will, but this does not mean that we rule over God. It does not mean that He cannot use our decisions, whether they be wise or foolish, to accomplish His sovereign plans. It does not mean that He cannot use our freedom to sin in order to accomplish His perfect will. It is the way He wants the world to be . . . for now.

To be fair, and hopefully clear, most Calvinists would not say that God took a neutral lump of clay and made some of it to be evil. They would emphatically point out that it was *through Adam* the whole lump was spoiled. John Frame, a proponent of historical Calvinism, makes this point in his introduction to systematic theology entitled Salvation Belongs to The Lord. In his brief dealing with reprobation, Dr. Frame says,

We should recognize, as do the Canons of Dordt (one of the Reformed confessions), that election and reprobation are not simple parallels to one another.⁵

We should also recognize that Paul does not offer an explanation for the alleged reprobation of Esau in Romans 9. Paul does not explain that Esau was rejected because of any sin or unbelief. Calvinists will usually admit that their view of Romans 9 is difficult to understand, but they insist that we must accept their interpretation and dutifully submit. They are asking too much . . . biblically and philosophically.

There is more to the character of God than sovereignty alone. He is also righteous, and it violates any reasonable definition of righteousness to suggest that God would allow people to be irresistibly bound by the effects of another person's sin, and then condemn them for it. A sovereign god might do that, but not a holy and righteous sovereign God. **Calvinism is asking us to abandon a principle**

of justice that is overwhelmingly (and universally) self-evident. Jesus did not indict the man born blind for his blindness. He did not indict his parents. He did not say anything about Adam. We don't ultimately punish one person for the sin of another. Calvinists know this; therefore, they must conjure up the imputation of Adam's guilt to everyone born into Adam's race.

9.16 HARDENING

I hope we can all agree that if (YHWH) God has ever directly caused anyone to sin then we can close the doors of Christian churches and Jewish synagogues until the real deity is revealed. I'll freely admit that this language of hardening is tricky. Nevertheless, there is no need to be moved off the conviction that God is holy, just, and good. We know that this particular Pharaoh will not likely be confused with a humble believer in the Lord God of Israel, but he knew that the God of Moses was the real God. We might hold out some hope for Esau's soul but we are hard pressed to find any of the fruits of the spirit in this guy's life.

By my count, God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart is mentioned at least 8 times in Exodus. Therefore, it is unlikely that this is some kind of unique or questionable translation. The point is being labored. The Hebrew word translated "hardened" is used many times in the Old Testament. It is more often translated as "strengthened" or "encouraged." The same word [khaw zak] is used to describe the intensity of the famine that led Jacob's sons to Egypt. It was a hard or strong famine. [Gen 41:57, 47:20](#) The word is also used to bring strength or relief to a brother who had fallen on rough times financially. [Lev 25:35](#) The word is used when Joshua was encouraged to be strong and take the Promised Land by force. (One would have to be a serious warrior to do what Joshua had to do. [Dt. 11:8](#)) This word for hardening is used in a variety of contexts but it is not used in the context of eternal damnation. As you may know, eternal damnation does not come up very often in the Old Testament. It is revealed much more in the New Testament, especially by Jesus. Jesus helped us to define the difference between this *earthly* life and death, and the *eternal* life and death. He showed that there is an earthly forgiveness, which keeps us

alive physically, and an eternal forgiveness, which yields everlasting life.

Mt 12:32

God hardened Pharaoh's heart by repeatedly showing His great power. There could have been absolutely no doubt in Pharaoh's mind that he was defying the real God. Pharaoh, like all men, had ample opportunity to respond to the urgings of God's Spirit in his conscience. Based on the graphic descriptions of the plagues, he had more than enough opportunity to humble himself. Pharaoh's heart was hard long before God hardened it further by the demonstration of His great power. If Pharaoh's heart were not already obstinate then the first plague would have prompted him to give up and let the people go. God used the king's wickedness to show His wondrous power through the plagues and the Red Sea deliverance. Every plague was an obvious opportunity for Pharaoh to humble himself.

If we persistently resist God's Spirit, then He may give us up to our own evil desires; that is often when the way of the transgressor gets hard. Prov 13:15 Every soul in the human race needs God's grace to restrain our sinful nature, just as our bodies need food and water. God is very generous with His grace, but woe to those who find the end of His patience.

Simply because someone dies young, or is taken in an act of God's judgment, it does not necessarily mean that they were reprobate, or even unbelievers. Jesus taught on the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. He said that it would not be forgiven in this age or in the age to come. Mt 12:31-32 Here, Jesus delineated two distinct contexts of forgiveness. One is temporal and the other is eternal. God's patience may keep us alive and healthy *in this life* but not necessarily be extended to the life which is to come. This is pertinent to our discussion. It applies to the many Gentiles who died as a result of God's commitment to Israel. A lot of men, women, and children died when God made good on His promise to give the Jews the Promised Land. We should not assume that they were all reprobate simply because they occupied the Promised Land before God gave it to the Israelites.

We know that Joshua had Achan executed for taking forbidden spoils from a defeated enemy. Achan's family was executed with him in spite of the fact that he confessed his sin. Over thirty men of Israel died in a humiliating defeat as the result of God's displeasure with Achan. In another instance, God killed the man who touched the

wobbling ark when he reached out to steady it. Joshua 7; 2 Sam 6:6-7 Another example would be the believing thief on the cross who was executed for his crimes, even though he would believe on Christ. Yet another example would be the Corinthian believers who “slept” in death for their grievous sins. 1 Cor 11:30 We read also of Ananias and Sapphira who were killed, by God, for lying about how much money they gave to the Church . . . after selling their home to give money to the Church. Acts 5:1-11 These all serve to illustrate how we might lose our earthly life because of our sin (or the sin of another) and yet may still be forgiven in the eternal context. Scripture does not say that all these people went to hell . . . or heaven.

Likewise, God may patiently endure the sin of unbelievers in this life but condemn them at the final judgment. I seriously doubt that God has killed every professing Christian, since Ananias and Sapphira, for lying about how much they gave to the Church. (Our own tax forms may be incriminating on the Day of Judgment.) Whether we say God hardened Pharaoh’s heart or strengthened it makes little difference in this context. Another use of the term, in a similar context, occurs when God is giving Moses instructions on how to negotiate the Red Sea on their way out of Egypt. God said,

And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, and they shall follow them.
So I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, his chariots, and his horsemen. Exodus 14:17

Here, the word “strengthen” might be a better choice than “harden” considering the context. The biblical account describes the armies of Pharaoh charging into the Red Sea with limited visibility due to the cloud and fire God placed between the Israelites and the Egyptian army. Moses also reports that God did something to affect the free turning of the wheels of Pharaoh’s chariots. It certainly would take an extra measure of “courage” to keep charging ahead in hot pursuit under these circumstances. If the armies of Pharaoh couldn’t see, and their chariot wheels were dragging, it would have been a good time to give up. (Retreat was suggested by some but the motion was denied.) Ex 14:25 There is a fine line between courage and foolhardy rage and it seems that Pharaoh’s armies had crossed that line. The Lord fought for Israel, but He didn’t make anyone sin.

God hardened (or strengthened) the hearts of the Egyptian army as He did to Pharaoh, himself. They did not receive mercy in this earthly context. God's hand did indeed "destroy" them. They were used as "vessels of wrath fit for destruction," but not necessarily in the eternal sense of salvation from sin. God withheld His mercy and used the destruction of their flesh to bring great honor to His name. He is God. He has the right. God never promised that He would prevent them from dying in such a fool's errand.

It would be a mistake to assume that anyone who dies, in less than noble circumstances, will be damned to hell, or they are reprobate in the Calvinistic sense. Believers may die as the natural result of their own poor judgment or God's temporal judgment on them, but that does not necessarily mean they will go to hell, or should be assumed reprobate concerning salvation. 1 Cor 11:30 It is appointed unto men once to die and then the judgment. Heb 9:27 **The final judgment is not a corporate judgment but earthly judgments may be.** Each one of those Egyptians will stand before God for what they did, because of what they believed, based on the light of truth they were given. This hardness of heart cost them their earthly lives but that does not necessarily mean it cost them their eternal souls. There is nothing in Romans 9, which clearly explains that Esau and his descendants, or Pharaoh and his armies, will spend eternity in hell. The context of their "destruction" is not eternal. It is earthly. That is, under the sun.

In Joshua 11:20 we read a similar passage concerning all the cities, except one, that Joshua had to battle when they came into the Promised Land.

For it was of the Lord to harden their hearts, that they should come against Israel in battle, that He might utterly destroy them, and that they might receive no mercy, but that He might destroy them, as the Lord had commanded Moses.

As mentioned before, part of the blessings given to Jacob was that the Jews would inherit the land promised to Abraham. Those promises are beginning to be fulfilled in Joshua's conquests. Jacob is long gone. He never conquered any nation but the promise lives on. It is being fulfilled through the unconditional election of Jacob's descendants. Again, there is no need to assume that every man, woman, and child "utterly destroyed" in these Israeli victories went to hell. They received

no mercy in the sense that their earthly lives were not spared. When we look at how this word translated “utterly destroyed” is used in the Old Testament, we see that it is consistently, if not exclusively, used to describe physical death and destruction of property. The term is not used in the sense of eternal damnation.

We may still hope that the sins of these people were covered by the blood of the Lamb, who died once for all. If any adults who died in the conquest of the Promised Land were humble believers in the revelation to which they had been exposed, then they will be in heaven. Only those who earned the “second death” by the suppression of God’s truth, which was written on their hearts, will have to endure the ultimate condemnation. God, alone, is equipped to make that judgment. Based on Jesus’ words about children and Paul’s explanations about the imputation of sin, there is good reason to think that the children in those destroyed cities found grace.

Using Pharaoh, and his armies, as vessels to be destroyed in the Red Sea is certainly not the same as saying that God made Pharaoh to be wicked and stubborn. It was God’s will to use Pharaoh’s wickedness to display His power on behalf of the Israelites, who would one day usher in the promised Savior of the world. This does not necessarily infer that Pharaoh was reprobate concerning salvation. It does not state it explicitly. Nevertheless, we certainly should not assume that Pharaoh died as a humble believer, but we need not assume that he could never have been saved if he had repented. It is reasonable to assume that if Pharaoh had any humble faith then he would not have been so persistently stupid. This was not an isolated poor decision. Pharaoh’s pride was habitual. It was the pattern of his life. I suppose that if he ever truly humbled himself before the mighty hand of God, it would have been *under* the waters of the Red Sea.

God providentially ordained this, self absorbed, wannabe deity to be raised to power in Egypt in order to show His sovereign power and His covenant commitment to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Lord God of Israel performed some miracles that will not soon be forgotten. Certainly, those people throughout the Middle East witnessed plenty of evidence that the God of the Jews is the real One. (It could be argued that some of them are still mad about it today.) All this supernatural public demonstration will eventually be used to validate and bear witness to the supernatural life and claims of Christ.

If David, Samson, Saul of Tarsus, and many others could be forgiven for big sins, which caused innocent people to die, then Pharaoh could too. He would need to humbly confess his sin and repent, like anyone else. There is little reason to think that He ever did, but that is neither God's fault, nor Adam's. It has been noted before, by both sides of this debate, that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Ex 8:15; 9:34; 1 Sam 6:6

It is a sizeable assumption to assume that since God is using Pharaoh's sinful pride to facilitate a mighty display of His divine power, that He had no genuine desire for the king's salvation. God used the disciples' cowardice and Peter's denials. He used Paul's rage against the Church. He uses the sins of mankind to make known the depth of His love. If we are to assume that Pharaoh, his armies, and the tribes who occupied the Promised Land were not elect for salvation because God hardened their hearts, then should we also assume that others who have been hardened by God were also reprobate? I don't think so. Let's see why.

9.17 THE HARDENING OF THE JEWS—WHY BLIND DEAD PEOPLE?

We have previously seen that God also hardened the hearts of His *own chosen people*. It appears that the 12 Apostles were affected by that hardening, and the spirit of stupor, which was sent to the Jews at the time of Christ. John 12:37-43; Rom 11:7-8; Mark 6:52; 8:17-18; 16:14

One reason why God might harden His own beloved people is fairly evident. If all the Jewish people (especially their leadership) were to receive Jesus as their King, then they would not have wanted him crucified. If He was not crucified (and resurrected) then no guilty sinner has any hope of salvation. Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans, every last one of us would have no Savior. The blinding served to dull the faith of believers and fortify the unbelief of those who were not “of the Truth”. In 1Cor 2:7-8, Paul explains:

But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

Now, the Calvinist teaches that ignorance does not excuse sin. In the daily reading for August 2, 2011 in Ligonier's Tabletalk magazine, the writer explains why.

Ignorance does not excuse sin, for humanity chose blindness in Adam, and all his descendants continue to choose it each time they deny Jesus.⁶

We see again, the Calvinistic dependence upon their view of original sin and the imputation of Adam's guilt. They need it to support the notion that God could justly punish those who sinned in ignorance of His Truth. Yet, Scripture is quite clear that ignorance *can* be a just reason for forgiveness with God. Calvinists do seem to admit that "humanity" was *not ignorant* of the commandment to abstain from the forbidden fruit. I wonder how many Calvinists would teach that "humanity" would have been held accountable for "our" sin in the garden if God had not told "us" to stay away from the tree. Would "we" still be guilty if Adam was ignorant of the commandment to stay away from the tree? I don't think so, and neither would most professing Calvinists. Ignorance, among sinners, can be a just reason for mercy.

Paul told us that he received mercy for his sinful persecution of the early Church because he did it in ignorance and unbelief. 1Tim 1:13 Jesus asked the Father to forgive those who were crucifying Him on the grounds that they did not know what they were doing. Luke 23:34 Paul also told his audience at Mars Hill that God "overlooked" the times of ignorance before the coming of Christ. Acts 17:30 It is not clear just to what extent this ignorance is factored into our judgment but the principle is clear in Scripture.

Perfect justice is not always found in this fallen world, but it will be found, eternally, at the final judgment. There are instances in Scripture where people suffer earthly consequences (or judgments) for their sins committed in ignorance, or for the sins of others. It makes sense that God would not ultimately hold us eternally accountable for that which we have not been shown. We've already seen this biblical principle of justice in the book of Romans. Sinners will be held "without excuse" because God has shown them His basic moral law through their conscience. Romans 1 & 2

If God overlooks, or does not impute the guilt of sins committed in ignorance of His will, then He may have done the Jews a favor by

hardening them and sending them a spirit of stupor. Their intensified ignorance may provide them with some hope. There is not much hope for those who understood who Jesus was and executed Him anyway. Jesus was most severe with those who “knew” Him and “knew” where He was from, but hated Him anyway. John 5:16; 7:28; Mk 12:1-12 Hell would be an appropriate place for those who sin against such Light. They love darkness so let them have it forever. Judas knew who Jesus was and betrayed Him anyway. He received the grace of God in vain. This is what Paul feared for the Corinthians . . . even though they had never seen Jesus in person. 2 Cor 6:1

Again, the point here is that this blinding was not intended to keep people out of the kingdom who might otherwise have believed. It was intended to assure that Jesus would be put to death and not crowned King . . . yet. The coronation will come later. First, He must be slain as the Lamb of God and then He will rule as the Lion of the tribe of Judah. (Judah, of course, was one of the sons of Jacob. Not Esau.)

Here, we can see that it was a brilliant and merciful idea to blind their eyes, give them ears that they should not hear, harden their hearts, and give them a spirit of stupor. It was wise of Jesus to teach by using figurative language with all those parables. **It was all done in order to assure that the people would not understand too much too soon.** Jesus needed to die before He took the throne. Thus, this hardening may have been a blessing in disguise. I have no doubt that God will factor in the effects of this hardening of His people when they stand before Him, as individuals, on the Judgment Day. He, alone, will know what each soul should be held accountable for, in spite of this blinding. There is no reason to assume that this blinding kept any sinners out of heaven who would have believed if they had not been blinded. It is also safe to say that every genuine believer will be thankful that God did what was necessary, without forcing anyone to sin, in order to assure that the Lamb was slain for the sins of the world.

This brings us back to an earlier observation, which is worth repeating. It raises a question for which I have never heard a satisfying answer from the Reformed camp. **Why blind a dead man?** Why would God need to harden (or blind) anyone from fully trusting in Christ if they were dead in trespasses and sins, as defined by the Calvinist? Why couldn’t He just leave them alone? If they had nothing but natural enmity for the truth then it would assure that they would reject Christ,

since He was the Truth incarnate. If these people were so dead, and abandoned to the “natural man” that they couldn’t receive the “things of God” then why did they need to be supernaturally prevented from fully understanding and worshipping Christ?

Anyone “spiritually dead” by the Calvinistic definition would not need help in suppressing the Truth. No one who lacked the common grace, which is needed to believe in Jesus, would need divine assistance to reject Him. They could do no other. **It seems that the Jews needed an external supernatural work of God to prevent faith in Christ . . . not enable it. The need for this blinding infers an ability to believe within the unbeliever. It shows that unbelievers possess the power of contrary choice in the context of faith in Christ. It deals a serious blow to the Reformed system.**

9.18 THE ISRAEL OF GOD

Paul’s main point is clear. If a Jew does not continue in humble faith in the truth, as it is most fully revealed in the gospel of Christ, then he/she cannot be certain of their inclusion in the *spiritual* Israel of God. To be an heir of the spiritual aspects of the promise to Abraham the Jew must meet the condition of this aspect of the promise. Like Abraham, they must be justified by faith. The Jews must repent and believe the truth. Paul now refers to the Jews as “Israel after the flesh.”¹ 1 Cor 10:18 We see this explained in Romans 11 where Paul uses the illustration of the olive tree. The unbelieving Jews were the natural branches of the (covenant) tree that were cut off because of their unbelief. Their unbelief, as a whole, served a blessed purpose as it put Christ on the cross. It opened the door for the spiritual and universal aspects of the covenant with Abraham to be fulfilled.

Abraham is understood, in a spiritual sense, to be the father of many nations. Gen 12:3; Rom 2:29;10:12; Gal 3:6-9 This “stumble” of the Jews gave every sinner the atonement we needed. Gentiles who are penitent believers in Christ are the “wild olive branches” that were grafted in to the main root system. Rom 11:17 Paul hopes this would provoke his Jewish brethren into penitent faith, and thus eternal salvation. It would be a double tragedy for anyone Jewish to fail to be fulfilled in Christ.

9.19 THE CALVINISTIC VIEW OF SALVATION HAS NO TRUE CONDITION

The Calvinist's bottom line conviction regarding salvation is exposed in their explanation of Romans 9. In their system, there is no meaningful condition to salvation, just as there was no condition for Jacob's election. The supposed "condition" of repentance and faith merely makes it look like men play a meaningful role in their salvation. The Calvinistic kind of "condition" could have been the color of our eyes, our height, wings, or anything else, which could not be independently determined by the common grace of God. Adding inevitable secondary conditions to the process of salvation would not change anything. If the first step of the process is irresistible, and any subsequent steps are inevitably determined by the first, then the fatalism is not changed. In their view, every essential aspect of salvation is entirely irresistible.

In their system, sinners don't play any truly independent and determining role in their own salvation. We could not because we are spiritually dead . . . like clay. We would be like clay, which can't believe the truth until God breathes life into it. They claim that the fall has left us this way and God does not work universally to enable everyone to receive the truth. **In their system, the salvation decision, which God made for each one of us, in eternity past, is the only decision that actually determines the outcome. If we decide to follow Jesus, it would only mean that God decided we must. It kills the spirit of repentance and faith.**

This forces us to wonder why Hebrews 11 is even in the Bible. Why would God honor men and women for their faith when they were simply doing that which they could not prevent? This view actually robs God of the glory that He should get for winning sinners to Himself by the demonstration of His great power, genius, and love. It also robs God of the glory that He should receive for justly punishing men and women for their independent refusal to humble themselves.

9.20 WAS GOD PATIENT WITH ESAU?

One last question concerning the Calvinistic view of Romans 9: Where is the *actual* patience of God with Esau, or anyone who would be reprobate, in the Calvinistic system? Where is God's patience *with*

anyone in a system that decides the final outcome before anything (or anyone) comes to be? In the Calvinistic system, God's true patience is not glorified in anyone. He doesn't have any patience with the non-elect in the context of salvation. They would be condemned before they take their first breath. They would be excluded from any hope before they would ever actually suppress the truth of God or exchange it for a lie. Rom 1:18, 25

Likewise, the elect will inevitably come to Christ as soon as God gives them the ability. They can do no other. As soon as God delivers the ability to have faith . . . they will have faith. Patience is impossible for God in their system. Nevertheless, patience takes time, even for God. The Calvinistic view goes beyond a sensible kind of determinism. It really is fatalism. **The Bible magnifies the patience of God much more than it defines the scope (and use) of His omniscience. Calvinism only makes sense for those who presume they know precisely how the omniscience of God works.**

When you insist on a truly unconditional election to salvation then you earn the title of Christian fatalist. This is because you have said that our individual destiny is entirely determined by forces outside of our control. Sinners would play no cooperative (or synergistic) role in their own eternal destiny. **In the Calvinistic system, either every soul is forced into hell based on their inevitable union with Adam, or they are unconditionally and irresistibly drawn like a bucket of water into heaven.** Their system is actually quite simplistic. This is something of a surprise coming from such brilliant people, who typically relish a complex problem like my dogs enjoy negotiating a big T-bone. The real complexity in their system is in its defense . . . not its actual propositions.

Calvinism essentially removes the biblical condition for salvation. It disparages the common grace of God. It marginalizes the final judgment day and replaces it with a bunch of convoluted speculation about the omniscience and foreknowledge of God. **If you find yourself trying to decide what kind of "Lapsarian" to be, then I hope you will realize that you are off the map; you should go back and see where you made a wrong turn.**

10.0 The Nature of Faith

As noted, a key aspect of our debate over election is a fundamental question over the nature of faith. Calvinists must biblically prove their assumption that saving faith is an irresistible and infallible gift, which God only gives to some people. The non-Calvinist must biblically prove that every sinner is capable of saving faith by utilizing God's common grace. There is no biblical text that explains this explicitly, in either way. If there was, then the debate may have been over a long time ago. Therefore, we must look carefully into Scripture to see if it answers this question about the nature of saving faith. The Bible does have a lot to say about faith. Perhaps we can glean a solid answer from that which is given. Both sides may need to admit that this will be a doctrine gleaned by "inference."

10.1 WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?

I'll bet you know the answer to that question. This question is posed in the Bible and it has a biblical answer. The question, itself, might seem to be a problem for anyone who believes in salvation by grace . . . alone. It is a really big problem for those who teach the Calvinistic view of salvation by *irresistible* grace . . . alone. In spite of the legitimacy of this biblical question, many Calvinists would rather eat broken glass, or be "water boarded" than admit that a sinner can do anything, in any way, that would contribute to their becoming saved. Nevertheless, I don't think there are many Calvinists who will go so far as to teach that when you repent and believe the truth, you are not *doing something*. (We won't spend any time debunking that nonsense.) I hope, by now you have seen their dilemma. On one hand, they want to give the biblical answer to this question. On the other hand, they want to answer "nothing." They strive to show that there is absolutely nothing you can do to be saved. They insist that salvation is entirely done *to you*, if you were chosen for it.

Note also, that the biblical question is not: "What must I do to know if I have already been chosen for salvation?" This, of course, would be a somewhat perfunctory question since there would be nothing anyone can do to determine their predetermined eternal destiny. Knowing the outcome would not alter it.

In a 2009 sermon on the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Tim Keller, a Calvinistic pastor and author, made these comments, which have already been mentioned,

A sheep contributes nothing to its salvation

The Shepherd has to do *everything* for the sheep.¹

If Tim speaks for all Calvinists then I'm sure you can see their dilemma regarding the biblical question "What must *I do* to be saved?" This is no small contradiction. (Some Calvinists will insist that our faith is not really "our faith." They don't bother with the typical perfunctory explanation of how "God's irresistible gift of faith" would actually become "our faith" after He graciously imposes it upon us.)

The Calvinist must take the clear biblical answer to this question and prove that "calling upon the name of the Lord" can only be done by irresistible grace. Rom 10:13; Acts 16:30 In their explanation, faith becomes an inevitable response to being born again. The chosen sinner would not really be doing anything . . . at least not independently. The new birth could not be prevented by the elect. Therefore, repentance and faith could not be resisted by the elect. They would be saved in spite of their natural resistance to righteousness and their (alleged) total inability to call upon the name of the Lord in repentance and faith.

We must not assume that Calvinists pull this idea out of thin air. They use the Bible. The sequence itself is logical. No matter how fatalistic and unjust their system may seem, we must never think that Calvinists make up their doctrines with no regard for Scripture or reason. Calvinists have led the way throughout Church history in defending the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. Some of the most brilliant, godly, and influential people who have ever lived were Calvinists.

Many Calvinists will typically agree that we must do something to be saved. However, this would mean that our eternal destiny is *conditional*. If we fail to meet the condition then we will not be saved. BUT, if the condition is utterly irresistible then it is perfunctory, even irrational, to call it a truly "free" or "volitional" human condition. **The logic of the Calvinist breaks down when he tries to teach**

that irresistible faith is also voluntary faith. They struggle, in vain, for words to describe their concept. The problem is not their weak vocabulary. The problem is the concept itself. There is no clear way to describe it without exposing the naked fatalism.

Most Calvinists are aware of this problem but very few try to explain it. When some brave and brilliant soul does offer an explanation, it is one of the more complex (and convoluted) things you will ever hear. This should be no surprise. They are trying to logically prove something that is not logical. (It's not a job for lightweights.) Saving faith cannot be both irresistible and volitional at the same time and in the same sense. Calvinists must tinker with the definition of the terms "free will" and "voluntary." They must invoke a very particular definition for the term "freedom."

10.2 WHY FAITH? THE QUESTION

As I have labored to show, Romans 1:20 teaches that sinful man can have faith in the true God. Everyone can see the invisible attributes of God in the things that are created. Jesus' comments about children show they possess the ability to believe. As we saw in chapter 7, George Whitefield, a Calvinist, has admitted that unbelievers can tremble over their sins. Also, the need for a blinding spirit of stupor to prevent faith in Christ also supports the ability to believe, within the unbeliever. We probably did not need the Bible to come to that conclusion since it is pretty obvious. Most people profess to believe in God. Even those who do not profess any faith in God demonstrate faith in various things, which they cannot empirically prove, or fully understand. Some very smart people (even some scientists) believe that life on earth was started by some kind of alien life form from outer space. That takes faith. Those folks should not be laughing at Christians who believe that Jesus walked on the water and rose from the dead.

The question before us, therefore, is not whether sinful man has the capacity to believe in things that can't be seen . . . including God. The question before us is whether sinful man can *trust* the real God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent. It is one thing to acknowledge the necessary existence of God based on the things that are made. It is another thing to trust Him from the heart. (Theologians have a couple of Latin terms for this distinction.) Again, the big debate is

over the question of whether we are each capable of humbly trusting the Word of God by utilizing His common grace. As we have been saying, the Calvinist says “no way” . . . we must be born again first. The non-Calvinist says that sinners can trust the word of God by using the common grace, which He gives to every one.

In the Calvinistic system, faith could be substituted by most anything as long as it is impossible for lost sinners. According to Calvinistic reasoning, **God could have said, “Whoever has wings will be saved.” Then He would irresistibly cause wings to grow on the chosen sinners and those wings would only fly to heaven.** It is a shame to relegate such a glorious and essential aspect of the gospel to such an irrelevant status. Their doctrine of irresistible grace destroys the nature of true faith. The element of trust is lost. Again, if you don’t like this kind of illustration then you must show that some essential aspect of salvation is *resistible* for the elect, in order to refute it. In addition, the Calvinist must show that some aspect of damnation is also resistible for the reprobate. Neither can be done. Therefore, Calvinism is truly a kind of fatalism.

Have you ever wondered why God decreed that faith should be the one and only condition for our salvation? The Bible does address the question and the answer is not because faith is impossible for people who are bound by their sin. The best answer lies in the *nature of saving faith, itself*. As we look now into the various aspects (or nature) of saving faith, we will see how salvation can be contingent upon it, yet still be all of grace. The nature of faith enables it to be the human condition for salvation because it is something that every fallen sinner can do. Yet, if we exercise faith properly . . . we will never be proud of it. It is not possible to be proud of saving faith. If you are proud of your faith then you have the wrong kind.

Perhaps the most overlooked half of any verse in the Bible is the first half of the famous text in Habakkuk 2:4. The second half of the verse you already know, but the first half of the verse is just as important.

Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith.

Faith is shown here to be the opposite of pride. Justifying faith is penitent faith. Thus, it cannot be boasted of. We can't boast of genuine penitence.

God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. James 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5

Question: How can “unmerited favor” have a condition? Answer: When the condition cannot be boasted of. When the condition is an admission of failure and helplessness then it does not undermine the doctrine of grace. These texts hold the key to understanding how salvation can require a condition, but still be all of grace. They may appear to be a contradiction but they are not. If the requirement was obedience to the “law of works” then we could boast. But when the condition is obedience to “the law of faith” then boasting is “excluded.”

Rom 3:27

These texts teach that humility is a *condition* for grace. Theologians might call this an “antinomy.” It would appear to be a contradiction but it is not. By its very nature, humility is uniquely qualified to be *the* condition for saving grace. Boasting is excluded because humble faith in God’s promise of mercy is not works of righteousness. It is definitely not perfect obedience to the law. Rom 4:2; Gal 2:16 **The condition required of sinners in God’s plan of salvation is not so much an act of righteousness but an admission of unrighteousness.** Again, this is how God can be the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus . . . and still be *just* in doing so. Rom 3:26 The “condition” of salvation is the confession that you are a helpless loser before the bar of God’s holy justice. It’s hard to be proud of that.

This is also, why salvation is said to be “impossible” for the proud. They “can’t” come to Christ without first being humbled. Jesus said to the Jews,

How can you believe who receive honor from one another and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God? John 5:44

Their “inability” to believe stemmed from their pride. Their inability did not prove that they were “passed over” for salvation before they were born. Saving faith is the antithesis of pride. If you love the praise of men more than the praise of God . . . it is not a good sign of

saving faith. Mt 6:1-6; John 12:43 The Pharisees loved the best seats. Mt 23 They probably introduced one another at Pharisee conferences with long glowing pronouncements of their academic, religious, and philanthropic achievements. They publicized their perceived goodness. They wore special religious clothes so they would be recognized. They probably liked to argue over who would have been the top five rabbis of all time.

Jesus is saying that it is impossible to be a proud believer. We will all struggle with the giant of pride but it is not possible to trust the finished work of Christ with a haughty spirit. You could fake it but God will know the truth.

The Bible teaches that we must humble ourselves. James 4:10; Mt 23:12 This is the language of independent personal responsibility. It is not merely done to us and it is certainly not done for us. Nevertheless, Calvinists will teach that God must humble us, *irresistibly*, by divine spiritual force before we can repent and believe.

Here the debate becomes pretty simple. The Calvinist essentially teaches that saving humility is irresistible for the chosen sinners, and impossible for the reprobate sinners. The non-Calvinist teaches that humility, by definition, must be truly independent and voluntary to be genuine. The decision to humble ourselves requires the power of contrary choice. God works in many ways to humble us. He is very good at it, but we must ultimately humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. 1 Pet 5:6 The command infers the God given ability; especially when there are eternal consequences that hang in the balance.

We *can* humble ourselves. It is possible by the common grace of God. **There are no texts of Scripture, which teach that we cannot humble ourselves without being born again first.** If God were to finally become fed-up with our sin and withdraw His common grace then we would be up the proverbial creek without a paddle. If God were to withdraw His common grace entirely from an individual sinner, then we might use the term “reprobate” in a biblical sense. No one seems to be certain of what the unpardonable sin is, and it is a moot point among Calvinists. Therefore, it is not likely that we will ever know who might be reprobate, in this sense. That will remain one of God’s secrets until the Judgment Day.

At the universal urging of God’s Holy Spirit, and the conviction of His holy law, we will sincerely, and permanently, swallow our pride,

or we will perish. All sinners are commanded by scripture and urged by their conscience to humble themselves. When we understand the nature of true humility, we can understand the nature of saving faith. It is then we can understand how faith can be the condition of salvation without boasting in it. **It is impossible to be proud of true humility.** The “condition” of contrite faith is not the same as the “condition” of keeping the law. If we kept the law well enough then we would not need Christ. We could boast in our obedience. Some do . . . but our obedience will never be perfect and our boasting is foolish and in vain. The value that God places on humility and His disdain for pride are unquestioned throughout the Bible. Thus, humble faith is the perfect condition for the just salvation of sinners.

If you know the Book then you know we could go on for pages listing the biblical texts, which show the importance of humility, and God’s utter disdain for pride. The beatitudes teach humility. The fruit of the spirit teaches humility. The request for daily bread teaches humility. The command to forgive one another teaches humility. All of Jesus’ healings were done to the humble. None of the people who were healed . . . demanded it. They asked, in humble submission to God’s sovereign rule.

This helps us to understand how Jesus could teach that those who do not forgive others will not be forgiven by God. It is not that we become saved by forgiving everybody, but we are saved through the kind of humble faith, which craves God’s forgiveness of our sins, and desires the same for other sinners.

Remember, unto whom much is given . . . much is required. Your parents may not have taught you to commit adultery, murder, and worship false gods but some kids were taught to live that way. Failure to forgive others suggests that we want them to sin, and suffer for it, even though we want God to forgive our sin. This exposes our pride and hypocrisy. This is so important that Jesus included it in His instructions for our *daily* prayers. I am sure you are acquainted with the text.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors Mt 6:12

We need not bother asking God to forgive “each and every one” of our sins until we are prepared to forgive others for “each and every one”

of their sins against us. This exposes an ugly and inexcusable kind of pride. Forgiveness will only come to the contrite. Forgiveness does not come to those who are contrite in word only or the professionally contrite. It comes to people who are truly sorry for their sins, and God can tell the difference. It doesn't matter how many times you have recited the Lord's Prayer, or how many years you have been going to church. If you are not broken to the point of forgiving others then you should not expect God to forgive your sins. Your pride is in the way. Mt 6:14-15

10.3 SAVING FAITH IS CONTRITE FAITH

The faith that saves is not merely humble faith. It is *contrite* faith and there is a difference. Jesus was humble but He was never contrite. Phil 2:5-8 Only sinners can be contrite and Jesus never sinned. Sinners must confess their sin and repent in godly sorrow. Jesus never confessed any sin or needed to repent. Humility is an essential ingredient of saving faith. Contrition is a specific kind of humility.

Whoever exalts himself will be humbled. Whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Luke 14:11

Earlier, we noted the kind of faith, which prompted Jesus to marvel. The faith that pleased Him was always contrite. The Roman Centurion, who truly did not think he was worthy to have Jesus in his home, the Gentile “dog” woman, the thief on the cross who confessed he was getting what he deserved, and the publican, who would not even look up to pray, are all biblical examples of contrite faith.

Remorse over sin is the language of human liberty and responsibility . . . not irresistible determinism. It is certainly not the language of human sovereignty. It seems that the Calvinist struggles with the fact that God can delegate the power of contrary choice to unforgiven sinners without relinquishing His ultimate rule. As a Calvinist, I was uncomfortable with these types of texts in the Bible. I preferred to teach that whoever humbles *himself* has already been irresistibly humbled by God, and can no longer exalt himself. This renders true humility impossible.

Calvinism teaches that the non-elect *can't* humble themselves even though God commands them to, under the threat of eternal damnation. Calvinists must constantly insist that we have to be irresistibly compelled to be contrite, which doesn't make much sense. It robs contrition of its essence. True humility is volunteer work and they know it. **This is why they must conjure up an elaborate explanation for how the elect can be irresistibly enabled . . . to voluntarily humble themselves.** (Don't try this at home without Luther or Edwards close by.)

These words of Christ about humility and forgiveness are teaching that the only people who will be "irresistibly" humbled will be those who refuse to humble themselves and then die in their pride. If the law of God, which is written on our hearts, with the "bullhorn" of conscience, does not teach us to fear God, then the Day of Judgment will. Every knee will bow. God will reign, as He should. The gospel is more than an invitation. It is a summons to repentance and faith. It is possible to ignore the summons but this will be met with consequences.

Humility has virtually no meaning unless we possess, at the same time, the "liberty" to be proud. You cannot be literally dragged into true humility. God can, and does, put the pressure of conscience on every person to humble himself (or herself). He is good at arranging circumstances that are designed to break our pride. But we must ultimately humble *ourselves*. If God's magnificent works don't humble us then they will harden us. Pride comes before destruction. Just ask Pharaoh. He is a great example of how a haughty spirit comes before a fall. Prov 16:18

Through the prophet Isaiah, we have an eloquent confirmation of this point when God tells us who will be with Him in heaven.

For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit. To revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." Isa 57:15

I hope you can see how contrite faith can be the independent condition for salvation and yet salvation would be all of grace. **Saving faith does not need to be "irresistible" in order for salvation to be all of grace. It needs to be contrite.** One doesn't boast of their contrition.

If they do then it is not contrition. I hope you can also see how our response to the message of “Christ crucified” is a wonderful gauge of true contrition in the heart. Anybody who really believes that they need such drastic measures to be forgiven of their sins must be contrite. That was not a little slap on the wrist that the Son received from the Father. The fury of God’s wrath was unleashed on Jesus as He bore our sins. It may have “pleased” the Father to bruise the Son, but we should never think that it was pleasing. [Isa 53:10](#) It was awful for them both.

10.4 EPHESIANS 2:8-9

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast.

This verse is treasured by Calvinist and non-Calvinist alike, but they do not always agree on how to interpret it. (Apparently, the grammatical structure of the text is a little awkward. There may be some confusion, which I am not qualified to assess.) Is Paul saying that *salvation* is not of ourselves, or is he saying that *faith* is not of ourselves? (He could be saying both.) You can see how the two are different. Faith and salvation are not exactly the same things. Both sides agree that salvation is the gift of God. Both sides would also agree that faith is a gift but they don’t mean it in the same sense.

Once again, the missing word helps distinguish the two sides of the debate. Calvinists would understand this text to be saying, “for by *irresistible* grace you have been saved . . .” They understand this text to be saying that saving faith is a gift, which is only bestowed upon the elect. Thus, they could not refuse to believe the gospel. Calvinists do use other terms besides “irresistible” to describe saving grace. Sometimes you will see words like “effectual” or “infallible” used instead of irresistible. They may sound a little better but they mean the same thing. They may as well say, “Forced grace.”

As we will soon see in John 6, Calvinism teaches that when an elect sinner is “effectually” called to Christ, it is understood to be a “dragging” to Christ. **Again, you will likely agree that it is hard to imagine being dragged to do something voluntarily, but this is what the dedicated Calvinist must sell.** In their system, when

the chosen sinners are born again, it “infallibly” produces saving faith. It can do no other. Sometimes Calvinists will merely say that sinners need divine “assistance” to savingly believe the truth, but historic Arminians would say the same thing. Divine assistance is not the same as *irresistible* divine assistance. We see, again, how careful presentation is essential for Calvinism to flourish. They must gloss over that which best explains their doctrine.

As we have been saying, most Calvinists will prefer a more subtle terminology that does not sound so fatalistic. They avoid being too clear. Seasoned Calvinists only break out the word “irresistible” among themselves or as a last resort to avoid sounding like an Arminian. “Irresistible” is their own word but they don’t like to use it very often. A little subtlety is needed to disguise the overt fatalism. Calvinism insists that the ability to believe the truth is an irresistible gift and uses Ephesians 2:8-9 to support their assertion.

The non-Calvinist disagrees. He will teach that the way of faith should be viewed as a gift in a general sense; but he is quick to point out that the words *irresistible*, *effectual*, and *infallible* are not in these texts in Ephesians. (They can scarcely be found in the entire Bible.) Paul is speaking in general terms about the Ephesians’ salvation. He is using the plural (we and us) throughout this chapter. No individuals are named. The way of salvation through faith is a gift, especially when contrasted to the works of the law as a way of salvation. The ability to believe the truth is a gift, which is given to everyone who could have the guilt of their sin imputed to their account. This is the context of Ephesians 2:8-9.

Paul is contrasting faith and works. The law is a wonderful thing. We should even call it a gift, but if any sinner were saved by keeping the law then his salvation would not be a gift. It would not even be a “salvation” if someone actually attained perfect obedience. If you were perfect then you would not need to be saved. You would inherit eternal life by earning it. Obedience to God’s law is important but no sinner will ever obtain salvation by their own obedience to the law. We must be saved by *Christ’s* obedience to the law. Gal 2:16

Also, remember that mankind is not the architect of the plan of salvation. Justification by faith was not our idea. Justification by faith is God’s plan and it is a glorious gift. **The way of salvation through faith is a gift to every person ever born, but this does not mean**

that every person will choose to use the gift and persevere in it. Some unbelievers will deny, altogether, any need for salvation. Some will stubbornly choose to be judged by their own righteousness. I don't like their chances before the holy bar of God's justice but they are at liberty to try. There is nothing here in Ephesians 2 that explicitly teaches (or necessarily infers) that our personal faith is *irresistible*.

10.5 RICH YOUNG RULER

This episode, recorded in Matthew 19, helps us to understand the contrite nature of saving faith, as it is compared to the presumptive arrogance of legalism. We read of the rich man who ran to Jesus and kneeled before Him asking, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" This man may have been dead in sin but he possessed the spiritual insight to know that Jesus was special. He was concerned about spiritual things. He knew that the commandments were good and should be obeyed. He knew that there is life beyond the grave. All this would take some spiritual insight. He was not breathing out venom towards Christ. He was able to see something desirable in Jesus but he was reluctant to admit that he *needed* Jesus to die for his sins.

We need to examine this man's question before we examine Jesus' answer. The man did not ask, "What must I do to be saved." That would be a different question. He was not interested in salvation. He did not think of himself as a sinner who needed to be saved by someone else. He was looking for eternal life based on *his* righteousness and God's justice. He viewed eternal life as a paycheck for right living instead of a welfare check that is given to the poor and destitute. He expected to earn eternal life by keeping the Law. He was there to boast of his own perceived righteousness and was fishing for a confirmation from Jesus. As you know, he did not get one and went away dejected. It is noteworthy that he did not go away cursing and insulting Jesus.

If he had asked, "What must I do to be saved" then he would have gotten a different answer from Jesus. This man could not enjoy the assurance of salvation until he acquiesced to his need of a Savior. He had some faith but it was not contrite faith . . . not yet anyway. He believed in God and in God's revealed law. He may have been dead in trespasses and sins, but he knew that Jesus spoke for God. He did not

see himself as spiritually bankrupt and therefore at enmity with God. We must call upon the name of the Lord out of our helplessness, or we do not call upon Him properly.

Calling on the name of the Lord is similar to filing for bankruptcy after mishandling your finances. Repentance and faith is an admission that you have acquired a huge debt and you are penniless to repay it. You need a “righteousness” handout and only Jesus has enough righteousness to pay off your debts. It is a humbling thing to trust the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s like declaring bankruptcy over foolish credit card spending. It’s not something you are proud of. The prodigal son was not proud of his faith. He would have been happy to be a servant in his father’s house. If you are proud of your faith then you have the wrong kind. Genuine trust in the cross is proof of a broken and contrite heart. This is something that God will not despise. Ps 51:17 The very first time we confess a sin we relinquish any hope of being justified by the law.

Salvation through faith is a gift for lawbreakers, not law keepers. This is why the rich young ruler went away disappointed. We can hope that this man got the point, which Jesus was teaching him. We can be fairly sure that Jesus desired him to be saved. In Mark’s account of this episode, he tells us that Jesus *loved* the man. Mk 10:21 It was, as they say, a tough love. Jesus knew what this man needed. The last thing this guy needed was to be encouraged in his self-righteousness. He needed to realize the futility of trying to be justified by the deeds of the law. He needed a Savior who could reconcile him to God. Hopefully, he realized that Jesus would be that Savior. If he goes to hell, it will not be because Jesus hated him and made no provision for his salvation. It will be in spite of Jesus’ love for him.

We must understand this concept. God loves every sinner and desires their salvation; nevertheless, He will banish them to hell if they reject that love. God refuses to dwell in heaven with the self-righteous. I am glad about that, even if it keeps me (and my family) out. Heaven will be a perfect place.

10.6 CONFESSION AND SAVING FAITH

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9

This may be one of the most important texts in the entire Bible. It explains how the forgiveness of sins can be justified. It explains how Jesus could die for everyone's sins, yet the effects of His atonement would not be imputed to the proud. It also explains how salvation can be conditional and yet boasting is excluded. It takes some faith to get alone with God, name your sins, and ask for forgiveness. It also takes faith to do it among family, friends, and foes.

Confession of sin is a vital component of saving faith. The contrite confess their sin and it proves some things about their faith. It proves that they believe God when He says they have broken His law and deserve to be punished. It also proves that they trust God's word. The LORD is a God who forgives sin. If you do not believe that God forgives sin then it is unlikely you would bother to confess your sin to Him. You would simply "do your own thing" and hope the Judgment Day is not really coming.

If a confession of sin is irresistibly enabled, as Calvinism says it must be, then it could not be a sincere confession. If the confession of sin cannot be prevented once we are born again, then it is impossible to conclude that it is a sincere admission of guilt. It only proves that God can literally "make" sinners confess their sins by giving them a new heart (or a new disposition of heart). **In the Calvinistic system, saved sinners are not really changing their own minds (or repenting). Instead, they are getting a new mind that must confess their sins. It can do no other. This is at the core of the Reformed error.** An irresistible confession would not be a voluntary confession. It would be like saying that maple trees "choose" to lose their leaves in the fall or the sun "decides" to shine. Sophisticated Calvinists try to apply physical laws to the spiritual, but it doesn't work here. The issues of the heart (or will), such as love, faith, gratitude, and regret are virtually impossible to illustrate using the natural world.

Confession can only be truly voluntary if the ability to reject our guilt is simultaneously possible. (This is the common understanding of the terms "voluntary" and "free will".) If we do not confess our sins, voluntarily, then God would not be faithful or just to forgive us our sins. If you were a prisoner of war, your interrogators may be satisfied to force some kind of insincere confession out of you. This would be useful for propaganda purposes but it does not work in the Kingdom

of God, where truth reigns supreme. An insincere confession of faith is no true confession. Likewise, an insincere denial is no denial. On the night of Christ's arrest, Peter denied Him 3 times. But his denials were *insincere*. He believed in Jesus but he was just too scared to admit it.

(We will look at that episode in the life of Peter in our chapter on assurance. We will engage the question of whether Peter could have enjoyed much assurance of salvation right after the rooster crowed. I have my doubts, but it does not necessarily mean that he was not saved when he vehemently denied knowing his Savior.)

I am aware that veteran Calvinists, who know their stuff, would attempt to teach that the elect do confess their sin out of their own "free will." I am glad when they do but their explanation is suspicious; it requires us to set aside the most common use of the terms "free will" and "voluntary".

10.7 MUST WE HEAR THE GOSPEL BEFORE WE CAN CONFESS OUR SIN?

"Nobody's perfect." This is one of the most universally agreed upon assessments of mankind found throughout the world. The number of people who might claim to be without any moral fault is tiny . . . and no one takes them seriously. Hindus admit to sin and shame. Muslims admit it. Christians admit it. Jews admit it. Primitive tribes admit it. Buddhists admit it. Secular humanists, agnostics, and atheists admit it . . . but can't adequately explain why they should care. Many don't like to call our moral imperfections "sin" or refer to people as "sinners," but a sin by any other name is still a sin.

This universally observed fact of life bears witness to the Bible's claim that the law of God is written on everyone's heart. God has given us all a conscience and it works until we ignore it so much that it loses its power. We each can see the invisible attributes of God in the things that are made; the essence of the gospel is hidden in those invisible attributes. In spite of the curse, the truth of God is embedded in every heart. Indeed . . . nobody's perfect . . . and that is our problem. We may be born sinners but we are also born with a conscience and the ability to humbly confess our sin. This common grace assures that every adult will be without excuse for his or her own deliberate and unconfessed sin. Rom 1,2

We will visit this question again later, but it is evident that people who live and die without hearing about Jesus can confess their sin to God. They could never have a strong assurance of salvation, but they are not *utterly* without hope of forgiveness. They are ignorant of their Hope. Jesus died to reconcile the whole world to God. 2 Cor 5:19; 1 John 2:2 This means that there is hope for those who never hear about Jesus. Millions may never read a Bible or hear the glorious truth of justification by faith before they die, but there is some hope for them because Jesus died for their sins. His righteousness will be imputed to them if they humbly trust the truth to which they have been exposed. This is biblically substantiated. Heb 11; Acts 10 We should not assume that someone is reprobate simply because they never hear the gospel. Likewise, we should not assume that they are saved. They will be judged based on their faith in the truth, which they have been given.

10.8 HEBREWS 11—THE HEROES OF THE FAITH

Any study of the nature of faith would not be complete without looking at Hebrews 11. It is one of the most inspirational chapters in the Bible. This chapter is a problem for those who insist that the worship of God, in ignorance of the Bible, cannot include saving faith. The chapter may seem, at first, to confuse the issue of salvation by grace through faith, but it will help us to understand the kind of faith that saves.

Hebrews 11 begins with the well-known definition of faith. Faith is “the substance of things hoped for and the evidence [or confidence] of things not seen.” It is all about *trust*. It is one thing to know about God and believe in His existence. It is another thing to trust Him in the face of life’s hardship, inequity, and tragedy. The chapter goes on to tell about the “elders,” or men and women in the Old Testament record, who obtained a good report by their faith. We see the names of three people, (Abel, Enoch, and Noah), who lived before the flood, before the promises were made to Abraham, and before the Scriptures were written. There was no distinction between Jew and Gentile when they lived and they were justified by their faith.

Then we read of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and other heroes of the Hebrew people, both named and un-named. We read of the many extraordinary things they accomplished and endured by

faith. They, too, were justified by their faith. We even see “the harlot Rahab” from Jericho remembered for the assistance, which she gave to the Jewish spies. Rahab was not a Jew. She would not have had access to the Scriptures. But she did have God’s law written on her heart; she had heard about the miraculous exodus of the Jews from Egypt. She was justified by her faith. Jesus will cover her sins.

We read in verses 13-16 a description of the nature of their faith. These heroes all “died in faith.” They were looking for the heavenly city. Hebrews 11 provides a clear affirmation that all of these people will be in the heavenly city with God. We are told that God was not ashamed to be called their God. Think of the implications of this . . . God was not ashamed to be called *Rahab*’s God. She was not Jewish and she was not always a good girl. Samson is on this list; he was not exactly the nice clean cut boy that most parents would want to marry their daughter. Hebrews 11 is inspiring reading but it does lead to a few questions.

The first question might be, “Where is Jesus in all of these Old Testament stories of faith”? The second might be, “Where is the conviction of sin and repentance in all of this?” A third question might be: “Do I have to offer my kids as sacrifices, build a huge floating zoo out of gopher wood, lead thousands of people through a big sea, conquer a promised land, be tortured, mocked, scourged, and wander in dens and caves, all while wearing goatskins . . . in order to go to heaven?” You may be inclined to prefer the “New Testament” way of salvation through faith in Jesus. It seems a lot easier and less dangerous. (Just kidding.) If Scripture did not tell us that it was their faith that saved them, then we might be tempted to think it was their works. Their works are pretty impressive.

There is, of course, no contradiction here with our New Testament gospel. **There is not a New Testament way of salvation and an Old Testament way of salvation. There is one way of salvation for every soul; it is by grace through faith.** Truth is truth. Faith in the truth was the same in the Old Testament era as it is in the New Testament era. We now have *much more* truth at our disposal since The Truth has become flesh and dwelt among us, in the person of Christ. It is evident that Jesus is the main theme of the letter to the Hebrews. Humility before God is also there. Repentance, contrition, and “striving against sin” are all covered in Hebrews. Heb. 12:4

An essential point regarding faith is explained in Hebrews 11. This point sounds similar to what Paul was talking about in Romans 1:18, right after he said “the just shall live by faith.” Remember, “The just shall live by faith” is an Old Testament text that is quoted in the New. The faith of these men and women, listed in Hebrews 11, had at least one thing in common. They believed the revelation of God. That is YHWH, the real God.

When God declared through their conscience, and/or through a prophet, that they were sinners in need of mercy . . . they believed Him. When He told them that He was going to do something . . . they believed Him . . . and planned on it. When He told them to do something that would be extraordinary . . . they did it. They did not keep all His commandments. All of these heroes had sinned and some of them were pretty big sinners. **They believed that this life was not all there is to our existence and that is a core ingredient of saving faith for every soul.** They believed this life was ruined by sin but they trusted that God would fix it, in the next life. They looked for the city of God. They were not carnally minded. They knew that the kingdom of God was not of this material world. Heb 11:13-16; Luke 17:20-21; John 18:36; Heb 13:14

Some, like Noah, were helped in their faith by God’s direct revelation to them, personally. Gen 6:13 We might expect them to demonstrate greater faith. If God’s Son came visibly into your home, and spoke to you personally, then you would be expected to demonstrate a greater faith than those who never hear the name of Jesus. Some, like Rahab, acted on second hand reports of God’s supernatural intervention on behalf of the Jews. Joshua 2:10-11 Others acted on relatively little knowledge or revelation of God. In spite of being born in sin, they all acted on the revelation of God.

Scripture never reveals when these heroes became believers, or were born again. It seems that the Holy Spirit did not think it was necessary to record the times of these events in Scripture. This is an important omission, especially in an age where the “altar call” and “closing with Christ” are often emphasized with such vigor. Even in the New Testament record, it is never revealed when someone was born again. We do not even know when the Apostles became justified as believers. It is evident that people like Nathanael, Simeon, Cornelius,

and Lydia were believers in the true God before they knew who Jesus was. John 1:47; Luke 2:25; Acts 10:1-2,16:14

Some may question *how* these people could be capable of trusting God if they were lost sinners. (Most of us probably didn't have this question until we were confronted with some form of Calvinism.) As we have seen, Calvinists are quite sure that they know the answer. They say that saving faith requires irresistible grace, which is given only to the elect. They teach that every one of these people in Hebrews 11 must have been born again before they could have demonstrated their faith. But the Bible never gives an account of their "conversion" or "new birth." Again, the Bible never explains when anyone was born again. Nevertheless, many Christians today are obsessed with knowing *when* they were born again.

Our non-Calvinist says that the *common grace* of God enabled these famous believers to have faith over the course of their earthly lives. A more definite answer may have to wait. Gladly, we don't need an in depth scientific explanation of how the human mind makes choices in order to trust God. We've been making choices since childhood, and like King David, we've been capable of trust since we were in diapers. Ps 22:9 We simply need to follow the lead of these great heroes of the faith.

We should not think Hebrews 11 is the only place in Scripture that teaches us about saving faith. It is not necessarily an exhaustive detail of the nature of faith but the idea of *trusting God* is paramount. This is very applicable for those of us who live after the incarnation of Christ. We have not seen Jesus in Person. Yet, having not seen Him, we can still love Him . . . by faith. 1 Peter 1:8

There is another biblical aspect of faith, which is quite clear in Hebrews 11. It is this: "Faith without works is dead." James 2:17-18 These people proved the sincerity of their trust by their works. They denied themselves, took up their "cross," and followed the Lord. They counted the cost of faith and pressed on anyway. Their body was "dead" because of sin but they lived by faith. Insofar as they were "of the truth", Christ was in them. Rom 8:9-11; John 18:37 They will inspire God's people until the end of time. Both sides of our debate over election generally agree (on paper anyway) that we must show our faith by our conduct if we want to be sure of our salvation.

We also need to be reminded that these examples of faith are extraordinary ones. They have been recorded in Scripture to encourage the rest of us who think traffic jams, broken electronics, double bogeys, and eating leftovers are severe tests of our faith. We may never face the kind of tests that these “heroes” faced, but if we are believers then we will face opposition. We will all personally face sickness, in one way or another, and we will all face death. We can count that cost.

10.9 2 PETER 1:1 AND PHILIPPIANS 1:29

Here are a couple of texts, which might seem to support the notion that faith is an irresistible gift. In the greeting of his second epistle, Peter writes:

To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.

The word “obtained” will be used by Calvinists to support their assertion that the believer’s faith is irresistibly given to them. But again, the word “irresistible” is not in the text. Likewise, the words “effectual” and “infallible” are not used, nor are they necessarily inferred. This text could be suggesting that Peter is writing to those who had no genuine faith in any revelation of God’s truth before they obtained faith in Christ, but that is not explicitly stated. This text could be used to support the Calvinistic assumption that faith is irresistibly enabled by the new birth, but it must be acknowledged that the new birth is not mentioned here either.

The word “obtained” could mean, “irresistibly received,” but it is hardly the only meaning of the term. There are a number of ways in which something can be “obtained.” For example, we can obtain tickets to a concert by paying for them, winning them in a raffle, finding them on the street, or receiving them as a gift. I suppose someone could irresistibly stuff them into your pocket against your will. Then you could decide to go to the concert and enjoy yourself. But this is not the way we usually use the word “obtain.” We know that faith comes by hearing and hearing comes from the word of God (Christ). We must hear the Word, in some measure, before we can trust the Word.

Rom 10:17

Again, it may be argued that Peter is writing to those who had no genuine faith before they obtained their “like precious faith.” This would lend some credence to the Calvinistic assumption that faith is irresistibly given to those who had none, but this is not our only option in understanding this verse. It could mean that they previously had a false or vain faith. It could be that they only had faith in the natural revelation and/or the Old Testament Scriptures, and now they had faith in Christ, like the Apostles. This seems to be what Peter is saying.

Since Peter was primarily an apostle to the Jews, it is quite plausible that he is thinking of fellow Jews who believed the Old Testament revelation and then came to faith in Christ. Gal 2:7 Peter could also be writing to those Gentiles who knew little of the Old Testament, but were believers in the revelation they received via their conscience and in nature. Peter likely is writing to all kinds of people who had many different views about God, but now have come to faith in Jesus. Either way, we do not see the concept of “irresistible grace” necessarily inferred in Peter’s introduction.

The opportunity to hear the gospel of Christ is a blessed privilege. Millions of people have lived and died without even hearing the name of Jesus. The opportunity to meet Jesus, in person, was given to a very tiny number of people. The opportunity to have actually seen Jesus, in person, would be the greatest privilege that could be enjoyed this side of heaven. It would be very reasonable to believe in life after death if you just witnessed Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. (You would have to be one stubborn sinner, or under some kind of spirit of stupor, to witness the life of Christ and still doubt that Jesus is who He claimed to be.) John 12:37-41; Rom 11

Trusting the wisdom and love of God is very reasonable when you have heard about Jesus. When sinners get to hear, or read, the teachings of Jesus, life makes a lot more sense. Many questions are answered. It is like having a bright flashlight turned on when walking outdoors at night. This is what makes Job’s faithfulness and patience so marvelous. He did not have the glorious light of the gospel to encourage him in his sufferings. He did not know who Jesus was but he clung to his faith anyway. Likewise, Rahab did not know who Moses was, let alone Jesus, but she looked for a city whose builder and maker was God. She died in faith, yet with no Bible.

The Jews had a distinct “advantage” over the rest of the nations of the world when it comes to enjoying God’s revelation, but it still pales in comparison to the Light that came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. Those of us who live after the coming of Christ can enjoy a kind of faith that was not possible for those who lived prior to His coming. The life and crucifixion of Christ is an indisputable historical fact. When we come to faith in Christ, it is “like” Peter’s and it is “precious.”

Peter is writing to those who have heard the gospel. Many were Jewish and some may have actually seen Jesus in person. Their faith had progressed from the rudimentary and/or the Old Testament principles of faith . . . to faith in the wonderful revelation of God’s only begotten Son. This is the faith that they had “obtained.” Peter is not explaining how the ability to have faith is wrought in the hearts of sinners. He is telling his readers that their faith is like his. He is a bondservant of Jesus Christ. He is not teaching that faith is an irresistible gift for those who have been unconditionally chosen to receive it.

Peter will go on to give us some very important instruction on how to be sure that our faith is, indeed, like his. Peter’s faith was the kind of humble, lively, and permanent faith that saves. He is teaching that our faith does not have to be demonstrated by great acts of sacrifice or extraordinary obedience. We do not have to build giant boats or offer our children as sacrifices to prove that our faith is genuine. Any *genuine* faith in Christ is enough to be a partaker in the hope of salvation.

It could be argued that Peter was, perhaps, the most privileged man who ever lived. The Father blessed him in many unique and extraordinary ways. Mt. 16:17 The Father has the right to choose how He will use our lives. He is the Potter and we are the clay. It is God’s right to ordain some people to walk on water, witness the transfiguration, and the resurrection of Christ. It is equally God’s right to ordain others to be born lame, blind, or in places that never hear the gospel. This is the same principle we saw in Romans 9 with the election of Jacob over Esau for patriarchal blessings.

Both sides of our debate would agree that many first century Christians were genuine believers in the true God before they came to faith in Christ. It appears that Nathanael was. When Jesus met Nathanael He said, “Behold an Israelite in whom is no deceit” [guile]. It appears that Nathanael was a believer *before he met Jesus.* John 1:47

Nathanael progressed from being a believer in the general revelation of God and the Old Testament revelation, to being a believer in Jesus, as both king of Israel and the Son of God. Nathanael was already a believer in the Father, therefore, he recognized the Son. John 10:30; 16:27-28; 17:21

We also know that when Jesus died on the cross, “. . . the graves opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared unto many.” Mt 27:52-53 This also implies that some people who lived before the crucifixion of Christ were believers (aka: saints). They are not remembered for any great deeds of faith, but they would have been justified by their humble trust in the word of God, through whatever means they might have received it.

Again, there is nothing here in 2 Peter 1 which necessarily infers that saving faith is irresistibly dependant upon the new birth. The new birth is not mentioned in 2 Peter but he does warn us about losing our faith.

We see the same thing in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. In chapter 1 verse 29 Paul said,

For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.

Paul is not saying that their personal faith in Christ was a gift, which they could not have resisted. The term “granted” [khar id zom ahee] does not always mean irresistibly imposed. He is saying that they were among those who were granted the blessed opportunity to hear the gospel of Christ, believe it, and to suffer for it. When believers proclaim the gospel to a skeptical world, it does not mean that everyone must receive it. Again, not everyone gets to hear the name and gospel of Christ. Word traveled slowly in those days. Most people, who were alive when Jesus walked the earth, had never heard of Him.

Today, many still live and die without hearing the message of the cross. (Although the number is getting smaller by comparison.) It was *not granted* to them to believe *in Jesus* but that does not mean they were shut out of any hope of eternal life. They can still trust the truth that is revealed in nature and through their conscience. They will be judged

based upon their reception (or rejection) of the truth to which they had been exposed. They will be justified by their faith in that truth or they will be judged for their ultimate suppression of it. In the depths of our souls, we know that we are sinners, and in need God's mercy. But we cannot know Who the Savior is until someone tells us about Him. Rom 10:14 That particular information is not granted to everyone who ever lives.

Remember, God does not have to do for all that which He does for some. God is under no obligation to assure that everyone hears the gospel in order to judge them fairly. It is the job of the Church to go into the world and proclaim the good news of Christ. Gladly, no one who would have believed the gospel of Jesus will perish in hell because the Church failed to get them the message.

10.10 PETER'S WALK ON THE WATER TEACHES THE NATURE OF SAVING FAITH

Question: When Peter walked on the water, what kept him on top of the water? Was it his faith, or was it the power of God? Mt. 14:28:33

Answer: Both. It was the power of God, which kept him on top of the water, but God sovereignly determined to exercise His power over nature . . . according to Peter's faith. Peter never had the power to walk on water on his own. God was graciously exercising *His* power according to the measure of *Peter's* faith. Therefore, as Peter's faith began to fail, he began to sink. God did not lose His power over the laws of nature because Peter was wavering on the waves. Jesus did not sink; He stayed on top of the water and helped Peter back into the boat. God *could* have kept Peter on the water, without faith, if He had wanted to. But He didn't want to. God made His power available to Peter in accordance with his faith.

God does the same thing with our salvation. We do not save ourselves by our own power or goodness. Our faith, in and of itself, does not save us. We are kept by the power of God . . . through faith. 1 Pet 1:5 (This text describes a synergism, in the context of salvation, not a monergism.) It is the way God wants salvation to occur, and it is a good thing because we could never save ourselves by our own power or holiness. Fallen sinners cannot be good enough to deserve eternal

life any more than Peter could walk on water by himself. But fallen sinners *can* repent and believe the truth in the same way that Peter could trust Jesus to keep him on top of the water.

The episode of Peter's short walk on the water helps teach us the voluntary and independent nature of faith. Do you remember what Jesus asked Peter when He caught him and helped him back into the boat? He said, "Why did you doubt?" For most people, this reasonably infers that Peter could have believed but failed. Admittedly, this episode was not about Peter's eternal salvation but it illustrates the nature of saving faith. Faith is trust. **We are not told that Jesus refused to irresistibly grant Peter enough faith to stay on the water.** We are told that Peter saw the wind kick up and his fear overcame his faith. His mistrust overcame his trust. Maybe Jesus was a little offended, in that, Peter did not think He could keep him on top of the water in a rough sea. I suspect (and hope) that Jesus is also very patient with our weak faith in the depth and power of His love for us.

Calvinism essentially says that sinners can't have saving faith . . . until God irresistibly grants them the power of belief. Once they have been given the gift of faith they can no longer fail to trust the Truth. They must savingly believe. Their view renders faith superfluous. When we assume that repentance and faith are *irresistible* gifts, it mocks the nature of faith and quenches the spirit of true repentance. We should not do this. Our faith is important to God. It reflects on His character.

10.11 THE NATURE OF EVANGELISM TEACHES THE NATURE OF SAVING FAITH

As witnesses and ambassadors for Christ, we are compelled, by His love and His commandment, to go into the world and implore people to be reconciled to God. John said that he wrote his gospel in order that "you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life in His name." Likewise, we "judge" that Jesus died for "all" therefore "all" should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. John 20:31; 2 Cor.5:14-20

It is a pathetic and backwards view of the gospel that sends missionaries into the world to tell "all men everywhere" that

Jesus *might* have died for them. In addition, it mocks both God and man to tell people, who would not be elect, that they could be saved if they repent. That would be a sick joke even if it were said in ignorance. Those who are reprobate, in the Calvinistic sense, will never be able to repent no matter how much they “tremble” over their sins. It would be like telling your newborn daughter that you will take care of her as long as she requests your help . . . in writing. It would be a mockery of a promise.

We will eventually look at the message of the cross in more detail. The confusion sown by Calvinism is on display when they evangelize. We very rarely hear Calvinists tell their children, or those to whom they are evangelizing, that the only way to know *if* Jesus died for your sins is by believing that Jesus died for your sins. This is not the language of the Bible, but it is a necessary implication of the Calvinistic doctrines. Fortunately, most Calvinists ignore this implication when it comes to evangelizing. This is especially true when they evangelize their own sons and daughters. Also, Calvinistic churches will typically ignore the implications of their doctrine when they teach children in their youth programs. **It is a good thing to tell people that Jesus died for their sins.** The Bible teaches it. To be clear, the saving effects of His death will only be imputed to sincere believers, but He died for every sinner.

Evangelism is another place where both sides of our debate look and act very much the same. If you read the evangelistic sermons of the famous Calvinists of the past, they often sound like non-Calvinists. They suggest that everyone will have an opportunity to be saved in spite of their creeds. Their preaching infers that Jesus did die for the sins of every person, even when their doctrinal statements . . . state otherwise. It's a good kind of flaw.

Evangelism, at its core, is simply the correct proclamation of the gospel accompanied by the summons to repent and believe it. It occurs any time the message of Jesus Christ is communicated to those who are ignorant of it, or don't believe it. The fundamental message is the explanation that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, who gave Himself on the cross for the sins of the world, and rose again from the grave. Faith in this gospel will undoubtedly yield salvation through the divine imputation of Christ's righteousness. We will look more into the doctrine of *imputation* as we progress in our study.

Biblical evangelism lovingly warns all sinners to flee the wrath to come, as if they can. When professing Christians fail to care about the salvation of their neighbors it is an anti-Christian spirit. How can we tell those who would be reprobate that God loves them and wants them to repent if God actually hated them, and refused to give them the ability to repent? Would it be OK to lie to some sinners, on behalf of God, if they are reprobate in the Calvinistic sense? I don't think so.

It makes no sense for the Calvinist to say that the Potter has some kind of general disposition of love for every sinner, if He makes some sinners to be vessels of wrath that cannot possibly return His love, or meet the condition of salvation. That doesn't say much for His alleged love. It is silly to suggest that God, somehow, desires every sinner to be saved if He has made no provision for his or her salvation. If God alone is responsible for salvation, and some are not saved, then we cannot logically say that He desires the salvation of every individual. These would be very empty words.

In their system, God does not demonstrate any saving love toward the reprobate. None whatsoever. That is the point of unconditionally electing some to salvation and passing by others. It makes no sense to say that God would have "reluctantly" passed by Esau for salvation *and at the same time*, teach that He hated him. **Our understanding of logic forbids us to think that God could have a genuine desire to unconditionally save a sinner who He did not choose to be saved.** That would be ascribing to God some kind of mental disorder.

The faithful Calvinist must never claim that God loves every sinner. If you listen carefully to the most dedicated Calvinists . . . they never do. They teach that God *might* love you, if you are chosen. But if God does not love you, then there is absolutely nothing you could do about it. He would have decided to hate you before you existed. If this makes sense to you, then you will make a good Calvinist. If you believe that God might actually be grieved by sentencing a stubborn sinner to hell then you would not be a good Calvinist. The difference is in the spirit.

BUT, if there was a truly independent condition for salvation then we could teach that God desires every sinner to be saved . . . if they meet the condition. In the proper biblical understanding, God is demonstrating his genuine love toward every sinner, including those

who reject the truth. Some sinners, who God desires to be saved, will perish, but it will not be because God did not choose them to be saved (by irresistible benevolence). It will be because they rejected the truth that God is trustworthy. They trampled over the truth. Their severe punishment would be just. They loved darkness rather than light and God will give them their choice . . . forever.

10.12 THE USE OF REASON IN EVANGELISM TEACHES ABOUT SAVING FAITH

In the Book of Acts, we see many accounts of people coming to faith in Christ. Some were Jewish and some were not. Some conversions, like those at Pentecost and the Philippian Jailor, seemed to occur suddenly; some did not. **We also see a distinction between being a God fearing believer and someone who has come to believe in Christ.** We see those like Cornelius, Lydia, and Apollos who already believed the word of God insofar as they had heard it. Therefore, when they heard the gospel of Christ they were quick to recognize it as the truth. Acts 10; 16:14; 18:24 Truth is rational and always consistent.

One thing that is found in virtually all of the testimonies in Scripture is the use of reason . . . both spiritual and empirical reason. There is *persuasion* that takes place in the presentation of the gospel to the unbeliever. The Truth is presented to the minds of each person. We read, often, of Paul who “reasoned” with people concerning Christ. Acts 17:2,17; 18:4,19; 19:9; 24:25; 26:28 Jesus pointed to His miraculous works as reason to believe Him. John 14:11 John said that he recorded some of the miracles of Christ so we might believe, and have life in Jesus’ name. John 20:30-31 We are told that many Jews believed in Jesus after witnessing the raising of Lazarus. John 12:9-11 We know that the Apostles did not hesitate to include the “supernatural” in their presentation and defense of the gospel, but this should not be understood as unreasonable or irrational. Acts 4:33; 17:31 It is wise to include the supernatural in our reasoning. We all see the miracle of creation every day and it is sound empirical reasoning to think that there must be a “supernatural cause” behind the creation.

Anyone who concedes that it would require a supernatural (or transcendent) God to create the cosmos must also conclude that other inexplicable miracles can happen. We see, and experience, the miracle

of creation every day. We know that “in the beginning” some of the universally accepted laws of science must have been transcended. It is no surprise that our faith in the biblical miracles will bring some ridicule. But our insistence that they actually occurred is nevertheless reasonable. At Mars Hill, some laughed at Paul when he spoke of the resurrection, but their laughter was empty. If anything exists then God exists; if God exists then the resurrection is reasonable. Acts 17:32

Christians ought not to be afraid of reason. Sound reasoning is not the archenemy of saving faith. Now, there is a *carnal* reasoning, which is the enemy of faith. The spirit of this world is opposed to saving faith but it is not really reasonable. Any thinking that rejects the existence, power, and holiness of God is contrary to common sense. It is unreasonable.

10.13 THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF FAITH

It seems that faith is dynamic in nature. It can fluctuate. It is not fixed or static. Our faith is not entirely like a light fixture that is fully on or fully off. When I was a kid, most light fixtures were either fully on . . . or off. Now we have dimmer switches that control the intensity of the light. The light is still either on or off, but there are varying degrees of “on.” Faith works something like that. If the light of faith remains on, in our hearts, then we will be saved by the grace of the cross. A small amount of faith can be saving faith, if it is genuine. If we have no sincere faith then the soul perishes. Sometimes it can be very hard to tell if a person’s “light” is very faintly on . . . or off altogether. Some weak lights can only be seen when the room is completely dark. Like Lot when he lived in Sodom. Gen 19; 2 Pet 2:7-8

The light of some Christians is so bright that it stands out even among other Christians. On the other hand, the light of some professing Christians is so dim that it can only be detected when they are surrounded by deep darkness. Next to an average believer, they do not look as though they have any faith at all. We know that the times are bad when the light of the average Christian is so dim that they cannot be distinguished from unbelievers. Gladly, it is never difficult for God to know whose light is on. He knows His sheep, even the sick and weak ones. (Again, we will examine this a little more in our chapter on assurance.)

This view of the dynamic nature of faith is harder to reconcile with the Calvinist's view of faith. The Calvinistic view of faith struggles to allow for any decline or weakening of faith because the gift of faith is said to be "infallible." The elect could not really struggle with their faith because it would be an irresistible and perfect gift. **It is a hard thing for a Calvinist to explain weak Christians.** They know they must, but their explanation is hard to reconcile with their views about saving faith and regeneration. They must show that the believing sinner is to blame for any faltering and stumbling in their walk. Thus, they must admit that the new birth does not necessarily bring dramatic and wholesale change in the life of the elect; yet it would be so powerful that it would overcome the "dead" sinners' total depravity and bring them to repentance and faith. This is a ticklish distinction, which is hard to support from Scripture. They must try to explain how God could give some of His elect an infallible saving faith that yields a weak and inconsistent lifestyle. Or, they must quit maintaining that the new birth makes a dramatic and evident change in the lifestyle of every believer.

When Christian believers still struggle with pride and unbelief Calvinists must be careful not to suggest that God "granted" them an *inferior ability to believe*. Likewise, when believers still stumble into various lusts they must be careful not to suggest that God gave them an inferior ability to repent and put off the old man. Calvinists often infer that the old heart has been totally removed, by sighting Ezekiel 11:19. They would not want to blame God's gift, so they must always blame the recipient of the gift for not using it properly. This makes the "infallible" gift of faith appear to be pretty fallible. They know that God's gift of faith would (and should) produce a strong and consistent spiritual walk. Old things are supposed to be "passed away", but sometimes the "gift" of faith would yield some pretty shoddy results. Samson's life would have made a captivating movie but it is hard to sell the notion that he had an infallible faith. Calvinistic explanations for weak believers sound much the same as non-Calvinistic ones. This is another weak spot in their system.

The non-Calvinist does not have such a hard time explaining the fluctuations of our faith. He understands the truly volitional nature of faith. Our faith is truly "our faith" and as a result, we still struggle, like Peter on the water. God is not responsible for our saving faith. He has delegated the responsibility to believe the truth unto every person.

His common grace enables us to have faith. He does not irresistibly impose saving faith on us. This is why we pray “Lord I believe . . . help my unbelief.” Mark 9:24 This humble prayer is hard to reconcile with the Calvinistic view of saving faith.

There can be an ebb and flow to our faith. Like a muscle, when it is fed properly and exercised . . . our faith flourishes. When muscles are neglected or mistreated, they suffer loss. Our faith does the same thing. Even the apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith. Luke 17:5 Why would they need greater faith if their faith was a perfect gift from God, as explained by Calvinists? In Luke’s account, it appears they made this request when Jesus had instructed them to forgive a penitent brother, who sins against them seven times a day. This reinforces the unmistakable connection between faith and humility. It takes some humility to keep forgiving someone over and over again, like God forgives us.

Again, this casts a shadow of doubt on the Calvinistic view that faith is some kind of irresistible and infallible gift. If saving faith were an irresistible gift, which could not fail, then why would we need more of it? I don’t think the disciples were actually expecting God to irresistibly enable them to forgive one another. This is not the nature of humility, or the spirit of their prayer. Here we see the Calvinistic overcorrection and their refusal to see the difference between the humble faith that justifies and works of righteousness.

Even beyond saving faith there does seem to be a level of faith that loves God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength. It can move mountains, cast out stubborn demons, and operate large orphanages without asking for donations. It can endure long illnesses and horrible persecution with a grateful heart. Not many of us ever seem to attain that degree of faith.

Saving faith is also best understood as the culmination of many choices. It is not something that we do once in a moment of time . . . that counts for all time. We can get in trouble when we assume that the decision to repent and trust the truth occurs only once in a moment. Sinners make the “decision” to follow Christ, or not follow Christ, many times and in many ways. We make these decisions every day of every year. Trusting the truth is a perpetual thing.

10.14 CHILDLIKE FAITH OR BORN SPIRITUALLY DEAD?

Question: Why would Jesus use the faith of children as a model for saving faith if they are born dead in sin, according to the Calvinistic definition? The Calvinist insists that children are born spiritually dead and with a heart of stone; therefore they cannot have saving faith until God acts upon them with supernatural power. They have it backwards. This is the opposite of what we read in the Bible and observe in life. God has revealed Himself to children. It is adults who ultimately suppress the truth.

Jesus used the faith of children as the model for saving faith in adults. Mt 18:3 He said the kingdom of God would be occupied by children and those who have childlike faith. Mk 10:13-15 When the Jews objected to children praising Him, Jesus responded by saying, “Out of the mouths of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise” Mt 21:15-16 We know Timothy knew the Scriptures from his childhood. 2 Tim 3:15 **All these serve to show that in spite of our inherited corruption, we are given the capacity to believe God’s word from childhood.** It is not said in Scripture that only elect children possess this ability after being born again. Children may come to doubt, or even reject, the truth as they grow up, but they start with the ability to believe. Scripture is teaching that we can spurn and squander this ability as we grow into adulthood. It is adults, who come to question God’s eternal power and Godhead . . . not kids.

You do not want to be the person who helps a child doubt the truth of God. Luke 17:2 Earthly parents will let us down. Some let us down in weakness, some in ignorance, and some do it deliberately. By the time we reach college age we encounter some “teachers” who delight in destroying our faith. They think they are doing the world a favor by discouraging serious faith in Jesus. Gladly, God is both benevolent and trustworthy. He never lies or makes a mistake. It is safe to trust Him. He will never let us down, in terms of His ultimate plan for our lives. Any One who can make the sun and hummingbirds should be trusted with all of our hearts. Children recognize this. It is adults, who think they are wiser than God.

The person whose religion is education or technology will trust in them to solve mankind’s problems, even the problem of death. Although they have never seen science resurrect someone who has

been dead for days, they still have faith that it might. They have never seen science permanently prevent a death; yet they believe that it will. This takes faith. Some highly educated people actually believe that mankind can solve all of our problems by education, technology, and politics. Yet those same people have the audacity to laugh at us for believing Jonah was swallowed by a great fish. Those people must be on some kind of “opiate” to trust the unreliable “crutches” of education, technology, and politics. Putting your faith in mankind is anal. That would be like expecting a two year old to explain energy, gravity, and chance.

I may believe Jonah was swallowed by some kind of a whale but I am enough of a realist to know that mankind will never solve his own problems. For all of our vaunted technological progress we can't even slow down the aging process. Families are still torn apart by sin. Tribes and nations still go to war. Anyone who thinks that mankind can solve the problems of sin and death is a gullible fool. This life is ruined by sin but God promises a better life in the world to come . . . for those who trust Him. Again, if God exists, then miracles are reasonable, and God is the only plausible explanation for the things that exist. Children recognize this better than many adults do.

The fact that Jesus sets forth children as examples of faith suggests that we are each endowed by our Creator with some capacity for saving faith. As children, we possess a simple or rudimentary faith in the wisdom, power, and goodness of God. Children find the afterlife a reasonable solution to the problems of life. By the time we are old enough to thoughtfully observe the creation we can know that God is not a cow . . . even if our parents tell us that He is. We also know that murder, adultery, theft, and lying are bad things, even if our parents tell us they are OK. As we grow, our belief can become firmly established or it can be neglected and lost.

In spite of our original sin, this capacity to believe is part of the common grace that God gives to everyone. *In this sense*, we could agree that the gift of faith is irresistible and universal. But it is not irresistible, in the sense that it must be kept and used. This childlike faith is not the inevitable result of the new birth. It is the inevitable result of the grace, which is given to every sinner born into Adam's race. Everyone has a conscience. We all get the law written on our heart. Everyone can see the invisible attributes of God in the things that are made. The

heavens preach a message and their sound goes out to everyone. Rom 1, 2; Ps 19:1-6

We must be quick, at this point, to make an important distinction. **We are not given the natural ability to live without sinning.** We are born in bondage to sin, thanks to Adam's transgression. We cannot live a perfectly righteous life, but we can avoid condemnation by humble trust in the wisdom, power, and goodness of God. We can trust Him, as we observe His invisible attributes in the things that are made. Or, we can lean on our own understanding.

It has been observed and documented that when many Christian kids go off to college they experience a dramatic decline in their faith. Many seem to abandon the faith altogether. Some young people keep the faith. Some return to the faith later in life and some do not. We are told that Bertrand Russell, a famous atheist, was a believer in his childhood until his faith was challenged by John Stuart Mill. Mill was a very influential atheist at that time. It is a sad story. It would be better to have a millstone tied around your neck and be tossed into the sea than to offend a little one who believes. Russell had the capacity for faith but he spurned the word of God for the words of a man who sounded smart. We should hope that Mr. Russell returned to faith before he died, or that his professed unbelief was insincere.

10.15 EVERY SOUL HAS THE CAPACITY FOR FAITH

I have been deliberately stressing Paul's words in Romans 1:20. The text teaches that every person has the capacity for faith.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

Again, *invisible* attributes must be seen by faith. They obviously can't be seen with the natural eye. They must be seen with the eyes of the heart. Paul is showing that even those who are dead in trespasses and sins can see the invisible attributes of God. **Therefore, it is just for God to expect everyone to trust Him.** We don't have to be "righteous" to see these invisible attributes. We don't have to be forgiven to see them.

Paul is showing that unbelieving sinners will be without excuse because they can deduce that God is trustworthy.

These attributes of God are *spiritual* in nature and Paul is saying that all men can see them. One does not need to be born again to see these invisible and spiritual attributes of God. As we saw in Romans 2, there is an “understanding” that men naturally have of the things of God. No one is born so “spiritually dead” that he cannot have some basic understanding of the character and will of God. We all will be held accountable for that knowledge. It may be possible to lose that understanding if we continue to sin willfully. We can become calloused and lose our understanding altogether. Perhaps, like Pharaoh.

Paul explains that those who suppress the truth and exchange it for a lie will be given up to vile passions. Rom 1:25-26 He says that we did not “like to retain God in our knowledge.” If this is an indictment of every individual then it shows how we naturally *had* some understanding of the truth. If we were born “spiritually dead,” by the Calvinistic definition, we would never have had the knowledge of God in the first place. Therefore, we could not be able to exchange it for a lie. **Paul is saying that we did not like to retain God in our knowledge. This infers that God was in our knowledge at one time.** This is not just Adam he is talking about. He is talking about every person. Adam is not mentioned in Romans 1 and 2.

Paul’s indictment is not merely a description of those who will perish. It is a description of every sinner who *deserves* to perish. Each one of us may not have committed every sin listed but we have all committed some of the sins listed. As a whole, mankind was “given over” to them by God. He could have completely stopped our sin but He chose not to. People become alienated from God by their own deliberate sin. Our minds are darkened by our inherited sin but this does not mean that we have no capacity to repent and believe the truth. It does not mean that we are utterly incapable of confessing our sin and seeking forgiveness.

The natural (or carnal) man cannot receive the deep and hidden things of the Spirit of God, but He can recognize his need for forgiveness. He can take in the “milk” of the simple gospel. Paul had to give the Corinthian believers milk instead of meat. They were slow to get the basics of the gospel; thus, they could not progress to maturity. Missionaries often report the same problem today. In fact, many church

pastors report the same difficulty, every day, in established churches around the world. 1 Cor 2:14

10.16 GOD'S LECTURE TO JOB INFERS A UNIVERSAL ABILITY FOR FAITH

The nature of faith is illustrated in the story of Job. You probably know it well. Some of the most profound and eloquent words in the entire Bible are in the final chapters of the book of Job. God wonderfully illustrates Paul's point in Romans, and David's words in Psalm 19. When God finally responds to Job's questions, we understand that He is perfectly just to hold every sane adult accountable for trusting Him.

As you will remember, after all of Job's complaints and questions, God responded with a few questions of His own, which should stop the mouths of every skeptic in every generation and culture. We won't write out God's entire answer here. God's first question for Job makes the point all by itself:

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Job 38:4

Uh-oh. As you know, Job got the message. He saw, again, the invisible attributes of God in the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead. Job kept his faith. Jesus covered his sins. At the final judgment, it will be our willful unbelief that ultimately condemns us. It will be the permanent and impenitent suppression of the truth, which Paul speaks of in Romans, that puts a soul in hell. As we hope to show in Chapter 12, the atonement of Christ has been made for everyone's sin, and the effects of His atonement will be imputed to every true believer. (Jesus will have the last word with those who heard the truth and rejected it.) Heb 10:26-31; Mt. 18:21-35.

It is not Adam's sin, which will result in our full and final condemnation. Everyone in heaven will have been a sinner. It is not the weakness of our flesh, for which we will perish. Even our big sins can be forgiven when they are confessed in true contrition and godly sorrow. It will be our ultimate suppression of the truth, in unrighteousness, that puts a soul in hell. David's sins were big and costly, but his confession was contrite and his repentance was genuine.

His sin had earthly consequences, as does ours, but his eternal salvation was not lost. He finished his race in faith.

10.17 WHY DID YOU DOUBT?

Jesus reproved people for their doubt and unbelief. He even marveled at their doubt and unbelief. Mk 6:6 Jesus also commended some people for their faith. He even marveled at the faith of a few. Mt 8:10 This is something of a puzzle for the Calvinist, since he teaches that faith is essentially an irresistible gift which is only bestowed on chosen sinners. It would make little sense for Jesus to *expect* sinners to have faith, if He knew they are born, spiritually dead, with no ability to have faith. The fact that He *expected* people to believe in Him would seem odd since sinners by nature could not exercise faith in Him . . . according to Calvinism. To them, it would be like expecting Lazarus to raise himself from the grave.

When Jesus asked, “Why did you doubt,” it infers an expectation of faith. For most of us, this logically infers the capacity for faith. This would be especially true when there is the threat of severe punishment for those who don’t trust God. If Jesus knew that they were not given faith then what is the point of the question? We don’t reprove babies for their table manners until we know they understand what is expected, and they develop the coordination to use a spoon in a civilized way. As we have seen, God expects us to trust Him based on the revelation of nature. Jesus expected people to trust Him, especially when they saw His miracles and heard His wisdom. This is especially true for the Jews who knew the Old Testament Scriptures. When he reproved the Jews for not believing in Him it did not sound like He was allowing many legitimate excuses. Apparently, Jesus knew that the Jews could have believed in Him in spite of Adam’s sin and the blinding spirit of stupor that God sent upon them. Many did. 2 Cor 3:16

Jesus said to the Jews who doubted Him, “But you do not believe, because you are not of my sheep . . .” John 10:26 This does not necessarily mean that they were not predestined to receive the ability to believe. He is not necessarily saying that they absolutely could never believe. Calvinists would have us believe that Jesus was identifying these un-named individuals as reprobate. In their view, these people were obligated to believe even though they were not capable of believing.

Calvinists must assume that God did not desire them to confess their sin and come to “the knowledge of the truth.” 1 Tim 2:4 If He did then He would have given them the ability to do so.

Jesus was showing that even though they were Jews, they were not really His people. They were His people in an outward and ethnic sense, but they were not His people in an inward and spiritual sense. (Not yet anyway.) They assumed that they were the true sheep of God but they were not. Their rejection of the Son exposed their rejection of the Father. We must belong to the Father’s fold for Jesus to be our Shepherd. It is the same lesson that we saw in Romans 9-11. Jesus is tweaking them in order that they might be provoked to jealousy and believe.

These Jews would be cut off from the “natural olive tree” because of their unbelief. Rom 9:11 They were chosen in the ethnic sense but not necessarily in the salvific sense. These Jews could be grafted back into the tree (or sheepfold) if they were to acknowledge the Son and humbly call upon His name. These are the same kind of people that Paul was concerned for, and praying for, in Romans 9 and 10. The “sheep” here represent the true Israel of God who are the spiritual sons of Abraham. This would be the fold of all contrite believers, who will dwell in eternity with God. Is 57:15 They are the spiritual elect from every tongue, tribe, and nation.

Again, the words of Jesus: “Why did you doubt” and “O you of little faith” both seem to infer a responsibility (and ability) to trust Him. We don’t question why a two-year-old eats with his hands and makes a big mess; however, we might confront a 16 year old who does the same. He should know better, and he would be capable of good table manners. Jesus views faith in the same way. When Gentiles showed great faith, it was similar to a two-year-old with excellent table manners. Jesus marveled. When the Jews *did not* believe Him it was like a 16 year old who still eats mashed potatoes and gravy with his hands. Jesus also marveled . . . and reproved them. Mt 8:10; John 5:31-47 They should have known better. They were capable of faith. This helps us to understand the nature of faith. It is not an irresistible gift, which is only given to some, and withheld entirely from others. We are born with the capacity for faith. We must use it or lose it.

Unbelief is a serious sin. The pride of unbelief lies behind virtually every transgression of God’s laws. When we violate God’s

commandments, we expose our mistrust of His integrity and wisdom. When we sin willfully, we are professing to be wiser, or more powerful than God is. Unbelief is dangerous. It should not be taken lightly. It is the seedbed of condemnation. We might be more concerned for the soul of a person who bitterly doubts God at a funeral . . . than for one who drank too much at a wedding. (Both would be sins, but one is more serious.) Unbelief was the sin behind the sin in the garden. Eve trusted the word of the Serpent more than the word of God. With Satan's help, she leaned upon her own understanding. Adam then trusted Eve more than he trusted God; God was justifiably offended.

Unbelief is an assault on the character of God. In spite of all the empirical and spiritual evidence for the trustworthiness of God, unbelief points a finger in His face and says, "You can't be trusted. I know better than You." Unbelief is not limited to the professing agnostic or the atheist. A person may believe there is one divine Creator but not trust His judgment, power, love, or holiness. Unbelief is arrogance. Unbelief says to the Creator, "I know you made the constellations, black holes, and centrifugal force, but You are not handling the world the way *I think* You should. Unbelief accuses God of ineptly handling the problem of sin. A person could acknowledge that the essentials of the gospel are historically true, but still not trust them with a faith that works by love. Judas Iscariot may have done just that.

The most credible Christians still confess the relentless drag of unbelief on their souls. Remember, in Habakkuk 2:4, we saw that pride is the opposite of justifying faith. Pride and unbelief are constant companions. It is safe to say that if we each had a stronger faith in the truth, then we would live differently. We would be slow to judge and quick to forgive. We would be slow to gloat and quick to confess. 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that love does not parade itself; therefore a faith which works by love will not parade itself. If we are proud of our faith then we have the wrong kind.

It should be obvious that God values our faith more than our physical health. In my work as a Gideon, I have visited many different churches in varying denominations and non-denominations. The prayer requests for health issues are the same at every congregation. It is not always clear that God's people are as concerned about their faith as they are their health. Yet, we can be sick or injured and still please God. But without faith it is impossible to please Him. Heb 11:6

We should all ask for greater faith, but watch out . . . this could mean some humbling experiences, and possibly, some fiery trials in our future. It seems that God is not interested in irresistibly (or monergistically) strengthening our faith. Even the Calvinist knows that growth in our faith works like growth in our muscles. If we want “six pack” abs and “big guns” for biceps then we are going to have to work out. If we want strong faith then it will take some rigorous *spiritual* exercise. Like cellulite in the body and cholesterol in our blood vessels, our pride will need to be broken down. There is no such thing as maturity without humility. The testing of our faith is additional proof that it is not an irresistible gift, as defined by the Calvinists. Faith is a gift that can be neglected, squandered, and even lost. As we will see in our last chapter, we must keep our faith . . . or perish.

10.18 THE TESTING OF FAITH SHOWS ITS VOLITIONAL NATURE

The testing of our faith is an integral part of life. It is a consistent theme throughout the entire Bible. James 1:2-3; 1 Pet 1:5-10 God tested the faith of Adam and Eve in the garden and He has been testing everyone else since. But the testing of our faith is rendered perfunctory if we understand faith in the way that Calvinists teach it. Why would God need to test His irresistible and infallible gift? Why would He need to test *His* gift if it cannot fail, and the reprobate can't have any real faith? What would be the point of testing the reprobate for a faith that has not been given to them?

The apostle Peter knew something about tests of faith. He passed some and flunked some others. He is a “regular kind of guy” and he had some things to say about the testing of our faith. In 1 Peter 1:5-10, he captures the essence of the mysterious relationship between our responsibility to believe and the sovereign power of God. Peter tells us that the elect

... are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Salvation comes to us because of God's power and love . . . yet it also comes to us through our faith. vs 7,10 When we falter in unbelief

and fall into sin it will not be due to the insufficiency of God's power or love. It will be due to the absence or weakness of our faith. It makes little sense that Jesus would reprove anyone for lacking faith if it is an irresistible and infallible gift. That would be like reproving a short person for not being tall . . . or a bald person for not having hair. The disciples were a privileged bunch, but Jesus still reproved them for their weak faith. They witnessed things that no one would ever see again but it did not always translate into a faultless faith.

Again, Peter's brief walk on the water illustrates the nature of saving faith. Peter knew that he could not successfully walk on water if Jesus did not want him to. He showed faith in the word of God. Yet, we see that after Peter panicked while walking on the water, Jesus said, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" He expected Peter to have faith in spite of the wind and the density of the water under his feet. Jesus' reproof suggests that Peter had seen enough of Christ's power to trust him for such a miracle. Now, we should not assume that we must be able to walk on water in order to have any assurance of salvation, but Peter could be expected to exercise that degree of faith based on what he had witnessed in the life of Christ. Peter saw Jesus walking on the water; it was Jesus, who commanded Peter to come out of the boat and take a walk. Mt. 14:22-33

We see in this episode of Peter's life a wonderful illustration of how believers are ". . . kept by the power of God through faith." If we continue in our faith, we will not sink into condemnation. It will be the synergistic working of God's saving power and our faith, in the context of salvation. If Peter had kept his faith when he was walking on the sea then God's power over the laws of nature would have kept him on top of it. But his faith wavered, and thus he began to sink. If we keep our faith in the promises of God's mercy then we will be saved by the gospel. It is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes. Rom 1:16 This is salvation by grace through faith. It is not salvation by works. Boasting is excluded by "the law of faith." Rom 3:27 It's all about trust. Trust, by definition, is volitional. It cannot be irresistibly enabled. Even God cannot force someone to love or trust Him. If we have no actual ability to doubt God, then we cannot truly trust Him.

The righteousness, which comes by faith, is not the same as the righteousness, which comes by the law. They may look similar on the

outward appearance but they are entirely two different things. They have two very different motives. One sees salvation as a thing to be earned, like a paycheck, and the other sees salvation as a gift to be received, like a welfare check. It is hard to be proud when you are on the welfare list. Every real Christian is on the “government” welfare list. God is the “Government” and the Lamb’s Book of Life is the list. Eternal life is a handout. It is a “freebie” from Jesus. The proud refuse it. Their names are blotted out of the Book. The contrite receive the handout with a grateful heart. Their names will be in the Book. Therefore, it is of faith that it might be of grace. Rom 4:16

Humble faith is our God given responsibility. Again, the Bible teaches that we are naturally capable of it by the common grace of God. Rom 1:20; 2:14; Job 38 . . . We should not need biblical confirmation that we must be able to do something before we can be punished for failing to do it, but we have it anyway. It should go without saying. Even Pelagius knew that. **Nobody will go to hell for being born a sinner. We will go to hell for slandering the integrity of God by suppressing the truth in unrighteousness.** Rom 1:18

The Calvinist, of course, disagrees. He has no problem with God punishing sinners for unbelief, which they could not prevent. The Calvinist is OK with God requiring faith of those who cannot have faith. You will remember that we saw this in their view of Esau in Romans 9. We saw it in the teaching of Matthew Henry and George Whitefield on original sin. Not many Calvinists will severely punish their own children for failing to do that which they have no ability . . . but they teach that God does. They assume that they have been chosen to receive salvation for “no reason in themselves.” It sounds very humble, but it opens the door to some insurmountable problems.

Peter tells us that trials test the genuineness of *our* faith. 1 Peter 1:7 He does not say that trials serve to determine if we have been given the irresistible gift of faith. This language is foreign to the Bible. Again, we might wonder why the genuineness of our faith would need to be tested if it was an “infallible” gift, as described by the Calvinists. It makes more sense to understand that trials prove the sincerity of our faith more than they expose whether we have been given the infallible ability to believe or not.

I find it hard to believe that God is toying with our souls by giving some elect sinners saving faith which is, often, barely distinguishable

from the “false faith” of reprobate sinners. Everyone should trust God. God delights in our trust in Him. He is pleased by our faith and without faith it is impossible to please Him. Heb 11:6 It is unthinkable that God would want to tease the reprobate into a false assurance. It is unthinkable that God does not truly desire every sinner to believe the truth and trust Him. How could God, who is the “Truth,” desire someone to ultimately believe a lie? Here, the Calvinistic conclusions contradict the very nature of God.

10.19 FAITH IS NEVER SAID TO BE AN IRRESISTIBLE GIFT

This is a good time to make a simple observation regarding the Calvinistic view of saving faith. There is no place in Scripture that explicitly teaches that saving faith is an irresistible gift for pre-selected sinners. This would not be difficult to state in plain terms if God had wanted to make it clear. The Calvinist can only provide inferences. If God wants us to understand that faith is an irresistible gift, which is only given to a predestined elect, why would He not just say it plainly? Why all the ambiguity? **Why does the Bible make it look as though men play a crucial, independent, and co-operative role in their salvation, if they do not?**

This is an important issue. Penitent faith, which works by love, is the one and only biblical condition that sinners must meet for salvation. There is no place in Scripture, which explicitly teaches that repentance and faith is impossible for those who are dead in sin. There is no place in Scripture, which clearly teaches that faith is irresistible for some and impossible for others. You will be hard pressed to find any words in the Bible that could be translated as “irresistible;” it would be even harder to find them in the context of faith. Omissions in Scripture can help us understand the truth and this would be a big one.

In addition, there is no place in the Bible, where we find an explanation of *how the mind makes choices*. Yet, for many, this is the essence of our debate. Both sides are making some inferences at this point. This point is more crucial for the Calvinists because their views contradict that which seems obvious to virtually everyone before they become Calvinists. (I’ve never met a Christian who thought that God would hold us accountable for something that He has not equipped us to do . . . before they became enamored with Calvinism.) We know

that unbelievers can refuse to rob banks, murder, and rape. This power of contrary moral choice must come from somewhere. If millions of unbelievers can resist committing murder and the homosexual lifestyle, then it stands to reason that they can repent and believe the gospel.

The burden of proof is on the Calvinist to show that it is a righteous thing for God to punish inevitable sins . . . with eternal hell. Understanding the basic doctrines of Scripture does not require us to have a clear scientific (or anthropological) understanding of the way human choices are made. Erasmus may have been a lukewarm academic who cried “peace, peace when there was no peace”, but he was right on this point. Understanding how the mind makes choices is only important to those whose bizarre assertions depend on the answer.

The Calvinist believes this philosophical speculation is vital to understanding the gospel properly. It is, to them, “the hinge on which all turns.” R.C. Sproul said that Jonathan Edwards’ book, The Freedom of the Will is “the most important theological work ever published in America.”² That is a very revealing quote. It reveals the Calvinist’s dependence upon (and obsession with) a mysterious philosophical distinction, which cannot be answered by Scripture. (God help us . . . if the advancement of the Kingdom of God is dependant upon understanding how the mind makes choices.) J.I. Packer says the same kind of thing about Luther’s book On the Enslaved Will. (aka: The Bondage of the Will.)³ Calvinists tend to pander to their love of the academic. Even those of us with meager to average intellect can understand the basics of salvation. We do not need to have *unvacillating preponderations regarding how our regenerated inclinations would logically, and necessarily, by cause and effect principles, produce the volition of will, by which we decide to follow Jesus*, if you know what I mean. We just decide to follow Jesus. No turning back. It’s not about physics . . . it’s a spiritual thing.

Please don’t misunderstand what I am trying to say. We need theologians and we need them to be brilliant. However, we don’t need to go beyond that which is revealed in Scripture (and evident reason) in order to understand what God wants us to get from Scripture. The advancement of real Calvinism may depend upon everyone understanding Augustine, Luther, and Edwards on “the will”, but the advancement of the Kingdom of God does not. We can all be glad about that. God’s Kingdom will come; it will not depend upon everyone

knowing precisely how our inclinations determine our choices. **Adam managed to sin without a sinful nature inclining him to do so; this is enough to cast serious doubt on their theory.** We must be careful to defend God's integrity as well as His sovereignty. The Calvinistic inferences undermine the integrity and justice of God.

Scripture is far more concerned with getting us to repent than it is with explaining how we do it, or why some don't. The Christian Church does not need elaborate and technical explanations of how the mind chooses in order to seek first the kingdom. We just need to do it . . . in childlike faith.

10.20 THE WILL AND JONATHAN EDWARDS

You may need to slow down for this section. You might even want to take a break and come back to it later.

The amateur Calvinist often scoffs at the very notion of a free will in the unbeliever, but the more sophisticated Calvinist tries to defend it, by a very particular definition. I have heard Calvinists testify of how God "dragged them kicking and screaming into the kingdom" and now they are grateful for his irresistible grace. It may sound humble, but the seasoned Calvinist wants to reject the idea that salvation is essentially a benevolent rape of the soul. They object to being called fatalists; however, this is a case where the amateurs would have it right, and the professionals cover for them.

Jonathan Edwards was a Calvinistic theologian. Most everyone agrees that he was brilliant, dedicated, and godly. I have already alluded to his book entitled Freedom of the Will. I think the title itself belies the need to enhance the presentation of the Calvinistic system. I find it interesting that Edwards felt the need to make the Reformed view look as if the unbeliever's will was, in some context, free. It makes me suspect that he was not altogether comfortable with the unjust and fatalistic implications of the Reformed system.

Oddly enough, Martin Luther's book The Bondage of the Will, basically teaches the same thing as Edward's book, Freedom of the Will. Luther's title is a more accurate description of the Reformed view but it doesn't *present* as well. This is where the defense of the Calvinistic view can get confusing, but they desperately need it to validate their system. (Again, I would be willing to bet a steak dinner that most

Calvinists did not have Edwards' view of the will *before* they came to their views on election and reprobation. I'll bet it came after.)

If I understand him properly, Edwards seems to want to dispel the notion that God forcibly drags the elect into His Kingdom *against their will*. He also wants to reject the teaching, which says that the reprobate are forced to take the road that leads to destruction. (I say "Amen" to both.) "Dragging" is not an English term that one would use to describe "trust." "Dragging," describes something that is done to us, whether we want it or not. We should be glad that the conscientious Calvinist does not like to *present* salvation as a holy rape, even though it is the essence of what they teach.

Edwards' book on all this business is not an easy read for the average person. Some guys are so smart they could prove something true, but few will ever know it. Their proof is so complex that it can't be communicated to the average person. Edwards' critics have called his book a smoke and mirror trick. (As someone who did not finish college, I should find it difficult to be so bold. But I think Edwards' critics are correct.)

In Freedom of the Will, Edwards explains that all lost sinners are free to do what they want . . . which is to reject the gospel. This is because their hearts are corrupt from birth, and they don't possess the grace needed to repent. Adam's fall would have already determined, for every person, what we can "choose" in the context of the gospel. Edwards insists that the elect sinner can only choose Christ, of his own free will, *after* he is born again, and receives his new heart. The new heart gives him the ability to repent and receive the truth. It must be noted again, that the reception of the new heart would be . . . (you guessed it) . . . irresistible. In addition, once the predestined sinner gets his new heart he is no longer able, or at liberty, to reject the truth. He would then be "free" to believe it because it is the only thing, which he can now desire most. This irresistible compulsion is what the Calvinist calls "freedom." (It is certainly not the common use of the term.) Thus, the problem is his particular definition of freedom. He picks one specific context of freedom and insists that it is the appropriate context in choosing to believe the gospel.

The nuanced Calvinist will insist that God does not "force" the elect to repent, but what they often fail to explain is that, in their system, the elect can't avoid repenting. Their regenerated inclinations,

which came from outside of themselves, would now be stronger than their natural inclinations to reject the truth. Thus, God's influence would irresistibly incline *the elect* to believe the gospel, while Adam's influence would irresistibly incline *the reprobate* to reject the gospel. **In the Calvinistic system, the power of contrary choice, in the context of the gospel, would never be enjoyed by any one . . . at any time.** I don't believe this view of "free will" will ever catch on as the appropriate definition of "free will" in the context of saving faith. It hasn't yet. It seems more like a sleight of hand word game being passed off as a technical scientific distinction. You could write your own dictionary but it will not change the way the Bible reads to the average person; nor would it change evident reason.

Our non-Calvinist teaches that every sinner possesses the power of contrary choice in the context of the gospel; this concurs with our basic sense of reason and justice. It is also consistent with the Bible. As unbelievers, we are able to believe the Truth and we are able to reject the Truth. Adam's influence inclines us to suppress the truth and God's grace inclines us to receive it. By the grace of God, every sinner has the power to choose either way.

Here is a place where comparison to the physical world falls short. Moral and spiritual choices do not have mass; therefore the laws of physics are of limited value in explaining them. I think Edwards was looking to the "hard" sciences to explain the nature of *spiritual* decisions. It doesn't really work. The Apostles claim that Jesus walked on the water. The, so-called, hard scientist says He didn't. Science has some catching up to do when it comes to the invisible things of the Spirit. To repeat, when we understand that saving faith is saving *trust*, then it makes the Calvinistic teaching look strange. It defies the meaning of trust. **Without the power of contrary choice, trust is impossible. Mistrust must be possible for trust to have any real meaning.**

Faith is much like courage. Fear must be present and real danger must be possible for courage to have meaning. For example, if there is no real danger for a platoon of soldiers on a routine supply mission, far from the battle zones, then no one (except their mommies) will say they were brave to go on the mission. Likewise, it takes no bravery to watch a professional football game but it does take a measure of courage to play in one. The possibility of danger and the real presence of fear are both required in order for courage to have meaning. I

believe it was John Wayne who said that courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway.

Faith and love work the same way. In order for our love for God to be genuine and meaningful, we must be able to hate Him. Even God cannot change that. Love is defined this way by God, not Arminians. This would be one reason that Adam was allowed to fall, in the first place. This is not a new objection to the Calvinistic system. I don't think it will go away . . . and for good reason. The glories of love and trust are both lost when the Calvinistic teaching is carried to its logical end.

The scarcity of illustrations in Edwards' book exposes the difficulty in explaining his theory on volition. He views our choices like the links in a chain, where each link is irresistibly pulled by the force exerted through the previous link. (Part 2 Section 1)⁴ He views the choices of the human heart like a literal tug of war. The force exerted by Adam's influence would always be greater than the force exerted by the common grace of God. When the elect are born again, they would supernaturally receive the power to overcome Adam's influence. God's grace would win the tug-of-war for the soul . . . irresistibly. The problem is that it is impossible to measure our inclinations and choices like physical forces. It is not possible to illustrate repentance the same way in which we view physical laws of cause and effect. This is because contrition is spiritual in nature. Chains are not made in the image of God. They do not make moral and spiritual choices. This is probably the reason that Edwards uses so few illustrations in his book.

It may be true that *one* definition of freedom would be to choose that which we want most at a given moment of time, but, as we saw in Chapter 3, this is not the only way the term "freedom" is used. Generally, when most people use the term "free will" we are speaking of the power of contrary choice. It is the liberty to make a choice from multiple actual options. **It is the ability to choose either right or wrong that makes a moral choice . . . a moral choice.** It is the ability to either trust the truth, or reject the truth, that makes it just for God to save us through faith, or condemn us for suppressing the truth. Unbelievers can obviously make right moral choices but this does not mean that they should be considered *righteous* before God. They are evil with the capacity for good. The good is enabled by the common grace of God. Mt 7:11; Romans 2:14

Likewise, genuine believers still make wrong choices even with their “new heart”; however, this does not mean that they cannot be viewed as righteous before God . . . in Christ. Christian believers are still sinners but they are justified in God’s sight. This is the wonderful paradox of salvation. We are sinners, yet we are declared righteous.

Another brief look back to the first sin will help expose the futility of our attempts to explain how we make choices. You will remember that Adam sinned even though he did not possess a corrupt nature. **Adam sinned without any previous corruption in his heart and this is a big problem for those who ascribe to Edwards’ theory on the will.** Edwards cannot offer us a viable explanation of how Adam could choose to sin *without* a sinful nature inclining him to make the bad choice. If we are bound to choose only what our hearts want most . . . then where did Adam’s dominant corrupt inclinations come from? Calvinists often say, “We sin because we are sinners” but this doesn’t work with Adam. He was not a sinner *until* he sinned. His slavery to sin occurred after his transgression . . . not before. This is one of the mysteries of inequity; it exposes the futility of trying to measure how spiritual choices are made.

If God put sinful inclinations in Adam then God must share the blame for Adam’s sinful choice. That would mean God is not holy. On the other hand, if God put the *capacity for obedience* in Adam, and the *capacity for disobedience* in Adam, then God would not be responsible for Adam’s sin, in any direct sense. It appears that *God* gave Adam a real, but limited, measure of autonomy, or self-determination. God gave Adam the power of contrary choice in the context of eating the forbidden fruit. Similarly, it makes sense that God could give the rest of us the power of contrary choice, in spite of our inherited corruption. God could give us the capacity for faith and the capacity for unbelief. He could give us the ability to prevent sin and confess it when we do. There is no valid reason why God could not delegate a limited measure of autonomy to those who are born in sin. Scripture does not deny this possibility, in fact, it teaches it. God is not robbed of His sovereignty by delegating the power of contrary choice.

The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Such is life. It serves no purpose to attempt to quantify the things of the spirit. It can lead to a spiritual pride. Both natural and religious man love to compare themselves to others. It is futile to apply strict physical principles to

our understanding of the conflict between Adam's influence and God's influence on our choices. That which is moral and spiritual does not have to play by the same rules as does that which has mass. Spiritual issues do not operate on the same principles as atoms and numbers.

In the physical world, when much is given . . . much will be yielded. This is not necessarily so in the things of the Spirit. In terms of the spiritual, it is possible that those who have been given much could still produce little. Likewise, it is possible that those who have been given little . . . might produce much. Isn't this what we must conclude when we see Jesus marveling at the faith of some, and yet marveling at the unbelief of others? He expressed disappointment in the weak faith of the disciples and outright anger at the defiance of the Scribes and Pharisees. Mk 6:6; Mt 8:10; Mark 4:40 On the other hand, it was amazing, even to Jesus, that the Gentiles and Samaritans, who had received relatively little from God, had so much faith in Him. Also amazing, is how the Jews, who had received so much revelation from God, could have so little faith in Him. It is a marvelous thing.

How could Rahab trust God years after the Red Sea deliverance, *which she did not witness*, and yet the Jews want to worship a golden calf shortly after personally *experiencing* the Red Sea deliverance? It is a wondrous thing. I can see how one might conclude that faith would be an irresistible gift for some, and not for others, but I don't think Jesus would be marveling over it. It is not said that Rahab was born again before she believed in the God of Israel. The biblical record prohibits us from always applying physical principles to the things of the spirit.

Why would Jesus get angry with the Scribes and Pharisees, if they had no ability to repent, and were blinded by God himself? God's blinding notwithstanding, Jesus expected them to have some humility and faith. Why would Jesus have these expectations of unbelieving Scribes and Pharisees if saving faith were a gift, which they had not received? I think Jesus expected them to trust Him because they were capable of it.

Why is Hebrews 11 in the Bible if faith is an irresistible gift that will deterministically produce works in some kind of immutable proportion to the grace that was given? Hebrews 11 is not a man-centered aberration in Scripture. **God's trustworthiness is honored by the demonstration of our faith.** The writer of Hebrews is not glorifying God's sovereign ability to make sinners have faith. The writer of

Hebrews is honoring God's trustworthiness as demonstrated by those who trusted Him in very severe situations.

God's common grace enables trust, but it does not irresistibly cause trust. Rahab is listed because she acted above and beyond that which would be expected for her limited knowledge of God. It does appear that Abraham and Noah had audible personal encounters with God Himself (and/or angels). Therefore, we might expect them to be more obedient. But offering Isaac and building the ark were truly extraordinary works of faith, even if God spoke audibly to them every morning at breakfast. Did those people really do anything noteworthy; or did they merely produce acts of faith, which were "determined" by irresistible divine enabling? If we believe that . . . we stifle the glory.

Also, for those familiar with Edwards' weighty book, it needs to be said that the theories of Mr. Chubb and Dr. Whitby are not the reasons that Calvinism remains the minority view in the Church. I've never heard of those guys outside of Edwards' book. Apparently, they have also tried to go where no man needs to go, by explaining *how* we make our choices. The problem for the Calvinistic definitions of "freewill" and "liberty" is not Mr. Chubb or Dr. Whitby. The problem for Calvinists is the way the Bible reads. The average believer sees the grace, but not the irresistible grace. They read the Bible in the way that it was intended.

Sometimes, I think we are still trying to eat from a forbidden tree. We don't need an elaborate dissertation on how moral choices are made in order to get the gospel right. Edwards, and his detractors, were needlessly forcing an explanation for that which needs no explanation. It is only the erroneous assumptions of the Reformed views, which need the explanation. **Calvinists have painted themselves into a corner and they need this kind of technical speculation to avoid teaching that God is unjust.** If Calvinists would hold firm to the contrite nature of faith then they would not need to construct such elaborate explanations of how choices are made . . . in order to defend grace. Calvinists are the only people who need elaborate explanations of how spiritual choices are made.

It is not possible that saving faith be exercised irresistibly, yet with a true liberty of choice. Calvinists are OK with this flaw in their system as long as it can be obscured by a theoretical fog over how we make choices and define free will. The average Calvinist relies on the

Reformed writers in the same way the hyper-dispensationalists rely on Scofield and Co. If the lost sinner could refuse regeneration, or if the regenerated sinner could still refuse the gospel, then we could talk of faith being truly volitional, in the best application of the term. But only then.

It is being less than forthright to teach that those who have been born again are now “free” to receive the gospel, if that is their only possible choice. If they are now literally “bound” to believe then that is not freedom (or liberty) in the common use of the terms. In the Calvinistic view, if you have *only one possible desire* regarding the gospel, then you are “free” to do what you want. They do not properly distinguish the contexts of freedom and liberty in the choice to repent. Calvinists fail, or refuse, to understand the power of God’s common grace and the duplicitous nature of the heart.

Remember, evil fathers know how to give good gifts to their children and every sinner can do *by nature* the things in the law. Every person can see the invisible attributes of God in the things that are made. Invisible attributes must be seen by faith. Mt 7:11; Rom 2:14; Rom 1:20 Adam sinned without a sinful nature. His choice was clearly not “determined” by the inclinations of a corrupt nature. The choice he made was not his only viable option. Likewise, we can decide to follow Jesus, in spite of our sinful nature, or we can reject Him. We also have two viable options . . . by the decree of God.

In the context of “freewill”, this has been the essence of the argument against Calvinism for centuries. It should not be abandoned until the Calvinist can prove that human beings, in this body of flesh, can be irresistibly compelled to love and trust anything . . . including God. Let me be blunt at this point. If this is the best that the Calvinists can do in the defense of their Christian fatalism, then they should get used to being in the minority among believers. A Calvinist who really understands, accepts, and *clearly* teaches the system will always be in the minority among believers. It may not be our “Pelagian pride”, which rejects their conclusions. It may be an innate and biblical sense of God’s holiness, love, and justice.

When you venture outside of that which is revealed in Scripture then you must exercise a holy caution, even if you are Jonathan Edwards.

We are all commanded to humble ourselves. It is a reasonable assumption that we must be able to do so, by the common grace of God. Yet, I don't know how anyone could be truly proud of "humbling themselves." Contrite faith is the perfect condition for salvation for anyone born in sin. Needing the cross is not something to brag about.

11.0 “Turn and Live” or “Live and Turn?”

11.1 THE CALVINISTIC ORDER OF SALVATION

Here, again, is a summary breakdown of the plan of salvation, according to historical Calvinists. (The “Infra” brand of Calvinists, anyway, if you know what I mean.)

First, before the world was made, God foresees the fall of Adam and His decree to curse each of Adam’s natural descendants. The curse would include reckoning them guilty of Adam’s sin. Thus, everyone is essentially “spiritually dead” as soon as they are born. Even if you were chosen for salvation, you would already deserve eternal punishment, as a newborn baby. Some of Adam’s descendants would have been unconditionally chosen for deliverance from this “guilt” before the world was ever made. At some point in their life, the elect will become born again . . . against their will. This could possibly happen as an infant since you wouldn’t need to understand and believe anything in order to be born again . . . in their system. Once you become born again, you will eventually and inevitably repent and believe the truth. Then, upon believing, you are declared just (or righteous), and are adopted into God’s family. Then you die, and you will be glorified in heaven.

This is what Calvinists call the “order of salvation” and many of them would die for it. (Some may have.) In their way of thinking, if sinners could independently do anything, by the common grace of God, which is essential for salvation, then grace would be no more grace. Also, they tend to assume that if any elect sinner could resist God’s desire and plan to save them, then that sinner would be sovereign over God. (This is not a necessary conclusion.) Calvinists have devised a scheme whereby that which we *must do* to be saved is altogether irresistible. They insist that their view is the biblical teaching.

Their system capitalizes on the ambiguity in the biblical term “dead in trespasses and sins”. Calvinists are sure that “spiritually dead” sinners can only believe unto salvation if they are spiritually resurrected first. They suggest that this “resurrection” is the new birth, which Jesus spoke about with Nicodemus. John 3 They assume that if the requirement of faith can be resisted by the elect, then salvation would be “earned” in the same sense as if it were earned by the works of the law. Since the word, “grace” means undeserved favor; this would be tantamount to

salvation through the works of the law and start us down the slippery slope that leads to the Roman Catholic practice of indulgences. Maybe you can see why I would compare them to an overprotective mother. Maybe you can't. Sin is deceitful and the Roman Catholic Church has done a lot of damage.

11.2 THE TIMING OF THE NEW BIRTH

This is an important topic as it serves to distinguish between the Calvinistic view of salvation and the non-Calvinistic view of salvation. As stated, the Calvinist says we must be “spiritually regenerated,” or made alive, before we can turn from sin, believe the truth, and be justified by our faith. However, it is not clear why someone would need to repent and believe the truth if they are already born again. **I don’t know how someone could experience the “washing of regeneration” . . . but not be forgiven.** Titus 3:5 This is a flaw in their system.

Our non-Calvinist says that we must turn from sin and believe the truth so that God will regenerate us, in Christ. When we experience the new birth, it is the “washing of regeneration.” We are forgiven of our sin. This is what is meant by the “washing of regeneration” in Titus 3. Our non-Calvinist never insists that we make ourselves born again by our own power. That is an overworked “straw man” argument of some Calvinists. The biblical sequence is “Turn and live.” The Calvinistic sequence is “Live and turn.” Ez 18:32

Once again, we will quote R. C. Sproul. Dr. Sproul seems to have taken the leading role in the defense of the Calvinistic view in the last decade or two . . . or three . . . or four. In the message Regeneration-A Sovereign Act in his CD series on the Holy Spirit, R.C succinctly says,

You don’t come to Christ to get born again. You get born again to come to Christ.¹

In the Calvinistic way, the new birth gives the chosen sinners a “new heart” which inclines and enables them to exercise saving faith. Let me be more precise: They teach that the new birth *irresistibly* inclines and enables the elect to exercise saving faith. The chosen sinners cannot fail to have faith once God makes them born again. **A good**

Calvinist says, “Regeneration precedes faith.” What they mean is, “Irresistible regeneration precedes irresistible faith.”

Again, this “irresistible” aspect is the rest of the story that effective Calvinists strategically omit in order to sidestep the fatalistic implications. Surely, you can see how that one word radically changes the meaning. This one word, “irresistible”, is at the heart of the whole controversy. **In their system, God benevolently forces people to be born again, who do not want to be born again.**

Most Calvinists prefer to downplay the “irresistible” when they explain their system. *It is their own word* but they don’t like to use it very often. It is simply too clear, and it is too hard to defend from Scripture. Here again, they have a hard time finding an acceptable term to describe their concept. Some will talk of God’s grace being “invincible.” That certainly has a more positive sound to it, but it means the same thing as irresistible. The same is true of the term “effectual.” It sounds better than “irresistible” but means the same thing. If you read Section 10 of the Westminster Confession, you would see the Calvinistic order of salvation put forth. They use the term “free and special grace” to describe the alleged irresistible quickening.² The Canons of Dort says:

... so that all in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated, and do actually believe. (Heads III and IV-Article 12)

He [God] graciously softens the heart of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe, while He leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their wickedness and obduracy.³ (Head I-Article 6)

There are a number of texts, which are used by Calvinists to defend their convictions at this point. When Peter declared Jesus to be the Christ and the Son of God, Jesus responded by saying that flesh and blood had not revealed this to him. He told Peter that His heavenly Father had revealed this to him. Mt 16:16 Calvinists will insist that this means Peter had already been born again and the new birth irresistibly enabled him to confess Jesus. Now, we should agree that it is a wonderful spiritual blessing to know who Jesus is. Millions have never even heard His name. Likewise, it should not be argued that

we could know Jesus apart from the working and drawing of God. However, Judas, and many other unbelievers, knew who Jesus was, and they were not necessarily born again. This text does not explicitly say that Peter was born of God before (or after) he confessed Christ. Jesus did not say anything about the new birth in this conversation with Peter.

We see the same sort of inference made by Calvinists when the Lord opened Lydia's heart to the gospel. Acts 16:14 Scripture does not clearly say that this was Lydia's new birth. We know that she was a worshiper of God *before* she heard the gospel. Like Nathanael, Simeon, Cornelius, and those mentioned in Hebrews 11, it appears that Lydia was already a justified believer in the truth . . . albeit a lesser amount of truth. She was not said to be a worshiper of a false god; nor was she said to be a hypocritical believer in the real God. Like those who lived before the coming of Christ, her sins would have been covered by Christ's atonement, even if she had not been introduced to Him by the Apostles. She would have already known the washing of regeneration when the Lord opened her heart to Christ. Titus 3:5

Also, we see in Scripture where God gives (or grants) repentance to someone. Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Tim 2:25 Calvinists will insist that this means they were irresistibly born again before they could repent or count the cost of following Christ. Our non-Calvinist would teach that when God grants repentance it would be like a judge, or king, who grants amnesty or a reprieve. God honored their repentance with mercy. It does not necessarily mean that God irresistibly enabled them to repent.

One verse that is often used by Calvinists to defend their position on the timing of the new birth is 1 John 5:1. The New King James Version reads,

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ *is* born of God . . .

The ESV translates the verse as,

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ *has been* born of God . . .

This is probably one reason that the ESV is the preferred translation among many of today's Calvinists. (The ASV, NASB, NIV, and the KJV all translate the verb [estee] as "is" instead of "has been". So, in

the infamous words of a past U.S. President, I guess this all depends on what is meant by the word “is”. I am certainly not qualified to speak on the best translation of the original, but I don’t need to be in this text. It doesn’t really make any difference whether we say whoever believes on Christ *is* born of God, or everyone who believes on Christ *has been* born of God. John is simply making the point that faith in Jesus is one of several proofs of the new birth. He is not saying that Noah, Moses, David, and Daniel, who lived before Jesus, could not have been born again since they never heard about Jesus. He is not saying that those like Lydia, Cornelius, Nathanael, and the Apostles could not have been born again before they heard about Jesus. He could simply be saying that those who have been born again, through humble faith in the revelation they have received, will always believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God . . . if (or when) they hear about Him.

Clarity comes hard in explaining the new birth. If you have ever had to untangle a bunch of Christmas lights, or cords of some kind, then you can appreciate what it will take to sort out the different theories about *when* the new birth takes place in the process of salvation. It can be a little frustrating. God may not want every detail of the new birth to be totally clear. After all, it was Jesus who referred to the new birth as a mystery. It was not Erasmus or Arminius. Yet, Jesus did seem to expect Nicodemus to have some understanding of what He was talking about.

11.3 OTHER VIEWS OF THE NEW BIRTH

Not all theologians and Christian churches believe the new birth must irresistibly occur *before* sinners can repent, count the cost of discipleship, and rationally trust the gospel of Christ. Many Evangelical Christians teach that we are born again *after* we repent and believe the truth. They teach that the new birth is bestowed when repentance is granted and the condition of faith is met. Some Christians believe that we are born again *as* we believe the truth, that is, at the same time. I suppose it is possible that the new birth could actually take place *after* believers die, when they are raised with their new spiritual bodies. It could possibly be said that believers “reckon” themselves to be born of God, in this life, in the same way that we “reckon” ourselves dead to sin, or crucified in Christ. Rom 6:2,11; Gal 2:19-20 The Bible does sometimes

refer to events which are yet to occur as if they have already occurred. For example, Christians are “raised” with Christ; they are “seated” in the heavenlies; yet we know that this has not fully and finally occurred. Eph 2:6 (At least we think we know it.)

Some Churches believe that you are born again when you are water baptized as adults. Some believe that you are born again when you are water baptized as infants. Some denominations teach that you could be born again but you could fall completely away and end up in hell. There is a lot of contrary speculation regarding the new birth and its timing. It may be that God intends for the new birth to remain something of a mystery. Here we all must see an important point: The Bible does not give us a great deal of explicit information regarding the timing of the new birth. As mentioned before, there is no place in all of Scripture where it is explained when someone was born again. Not one place.

Nevertheless, this does not stop some theologians and wannabe theologians from taking a strict and uncompromising stand on it. This is especially true of those theologians whose entire soteriology depends upon knowing *when* the new birth takes place. If the Calvinists are wrong about this, then their whole system crashes and burns.

Some Christians don’t pretend to know precisely the chronology of the salvation process. They do not think it is necessary to have certainty on such things. They deny we need such specific detail in order to teach salvation by grace. They are not convinced that the Bible speaks clearly to the timing of the new birth. They are quick to point out that Jesus likened it unto the wind, of which we cannot tell where it comes from, and where it goes. They may also point out that it is dangerous speculation to suggest that we know when someone was born of the Spirit, because God does not intend for us to know when someone becomes born again. He is more concerned that we demonstrate the new life, right now, than knowing when the new birth takes place in the process of salvation.

I believe one of the reasons that the term “born again Christian” has become so odious is that it presumes absolute certainty when the biblical concept is deliberately cloaked with mystery. As we will eventually see in Chapter 13, the marks of the spiritual rebirth are not demonstrated once in a lifetime. These marks are habits and patterns, which must be continued throughout our life before we may assume that we are born of God (or will be after we die). Most Bible believers

agree that we need to know if we bear the marks of the new birth, which are set forth in Scripture.

11.4 WHAT IS THE NEW BIRTH?

If previous arguments have not been sufficient to get you free from Calvin's irresistible grip then we will press on into the mystery of the new birth. By now, you must understand that this question is a key component of the debate over election. The words of Jesus in John 3 are clear. We must be born again to see and/or enter the Kingdom of God. Whatever the new birth is, it is absolutely essential for everlasting life. However, the precise definition of the new birth is not explicitly clear in Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus.

Jesus did not give us a great deal of detail as to what this re-birth actually is. This can be a little disconcerting when Jesus tells us that something is necessary to enter heaven but doesn't tell us exactly what it is. When Nicodemus was slow to understand, Jesus responded by speaking of His upcoming death on the cross. He promised that whoever would believe in Him would not perish, but would have everlasting life. This suggests that being born again is very much related to faith in the only begotten Son of God, who is the Truth and the incarnate Word of God. We may all be able to agree on this much. We should not completely separate the new birth from believing in Jesus . . . and Jesus is the Truth. Now that Jesus has come, and we have the New Testament writings, we have a far superior way of assessing our faith in the truth of God.

The texts in John 3 are the only places where Jesus combines the terms translated "born" [*gennao*] and "again" [*anothen*], or "from above." Peter uses the expression "born again" [*anogennao*] in his first epistle. He speaks of being born again to a living hope by incorruptible seed, which is the word of God. He does not give us a lot of specific details regarding this re-birth. Elsewhere in the New Testament we see the terms "regeneration," "quickened," "made alive" and "raised" in a similar context.

We all should admit that any attempt to understand fully the nature of the new birth would take us into the land of speculation and inference. To repeat once again, there is no explicit text in the Bible that simply states when the new birth occurs, in the life of every

believer. It will be a doctrine of *inference* for anyone who tries to take a firm position. We must be careful not to allow our inferences about the doctrines of salvation to rule over that, which is explicitly clear in Scripture.

If our understanding of the grace of God in salvation is vitally dependant on an exhaustive and ironclad understanding of the term, “born again” then we should not be surprised if our views are met with some skepticism. A reluctance to accept a simplistic explanation of that which Jesus compared to the wind is not necessarily a bad thing. It may be wise. The explanation given by Jesus, to Nicodemus, about the nature of the new birth, was the gospel in a nutshell. It was John 3:16. The Bible offers more detail on the nature of faith than it does on the nature of the spiritual rebirth.

Let’s take a look into some of the texts relating to the new birth and see if we can draw some conclusions. (If you have made it this far, you must have good reason to stay with it. I admire your determination. I hope this is helpful for your own personal understanding.) These issues inevitably come up in any serious study of the Bible.

I hope we can all agree that if the new birth actually takes place while we are in this body of flesh then it is best recognized and confirmed, after the fact. Our feelings are not the best way to gauge the reality of the new birth in our souls, but it is surprising to see the number of Christians, even Calvinists, who look to their feelings as the biggest indicator of their own regeneration.

We do get some very helpful details about the new birth in the book of 1 John. In that epistle, John uses the term “born of God” several times. In short, John teaches that the proof of the new birth is the *new life*, which certainly makes sense. (As promised, we will examine these proofs in Chapter 13.) Although John provides a great deal of helpful information on what the new birth will look like in our lives, he does not tell us, explicitly, *when* it actually occurs. Both sides of our debate will generally agree that the proofs of the new birth will be observed over time, after we make a profession of faith. Both sides will agree that merely claiming to be born of God does not mean that you are. Unbelievers can *claim* to be born of God.

One problem we have is that many professing Christians do not appear to change all that much after they profess to be born again. Virtually everyone who claims to be born again still struggles, to some

degree, with sin. Some appear to be dominated by sin. Some still may doubt the doctrines of Jesus. Some, who claim to be born again, are even bitter and unforgiving. Some who claim to be born again act like there is no resurrection . . . or heaven. They claim to be pilgrims and strangers on the earth, but their lives fall apart when they lose their health, money, or a loved one. They claim to be alive spiritually but live as though this earthly life is all there is to our existence.

Some, who claim to be born again, change for a while, only to slide back into a life that resembles the unbeliever more than the believer. Many even abandon and renounce the faith, altogether, after credibly claiming to be born of the Spirit. Many dramatic and emotional scenes at church altars and stadium floors end up producing little permanent change.

Genuine believers still struggle with sin and unbelief. If King David was born again during the debacle with Bathsheba . . . he sure didn't look like it. The same would be true of the apostle Peter when he was swearing that he didn't know Jesus. Likewise, with Demas, who left the Church for his love of this present world. It is evident that some in the churches of Corinth and Galatia were not thinking and behaving like new creatures in Christ. 2 Sam 11; John 18; 2 Tim 4:10; 1 Cor 1,3,5, 11; Gal 3:1; 4:20

11.5 JOHN 3—JESUS ON BEING BORN AGAIN

Let's look first at the familiar text in John 3. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. It appears that he may have been a genuine believer in the truth of God (as far as he had been exposed to it) before Jesus came on the scene. It would be hard to conclude that he was "dead in trespasses and sins" as defined by the Calvinists, and still be able to recognize that Jesus was a teacher who came from God. As we have seen, that would be impossible for anyone who is dead in sin as Calvinists define the term. Nevertheless, Nicodemus may have been a genuine believer at this time but his faith lacked the knowledge of Christ. Here is what Jesus said to him:

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again [from above], he cannot see the Kingdom of God.

Nicodemus was confused, and Jesus then said,

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.

Nicodemus remained confused. He was patiently reproved for his dullness. Jesus expected more from this teacher in Israel. Jesus went on to teach him about faith in the only begotten Son of God. He likened faith in the Son of God to a well-known event in Jewish history. You may remember when the Jews were in the wilderness they were instructed to look at the bronze serpent, which Moses held up, in order to be delivered from the bite of the “fiery serpents.” Num 21:9 Jesus explains that faith in Him was like faith in the bronze serpent, only in the context of eternal life. Just as the Jews looked unto the statue to be delivered from the sting of the serpent, we are to look unto Jesus to be delivered from the eternal sting of death, which is sin. Of course, John 3:16 is a very famous teaching of Christ regarding salvation by grace through faith.

This discourse is the only place in the gospels where Jesus specifically mentions the spiritual rebirth, and it is not very definitive. There is nothing said about anyone’s *ability* to look at Moses’ serpent or to believe in Christ. It is doubtful that looking unto the bronze serpent would have required a supernatural miracle to be performed on the wills of those who looked at it. It is reasonably assumed that the Jews were capable of looking at the bronze serpent. Likewise, it is reasonable to assume that we can look unto Jesus for our eternal hope.

It seems clear that Jesus did not want to explain every detail of the new birth to Nicodemus. It is significant that Nicodemus seemed to be a man of genuine faith, but he was puzzled by Jesus’ talk of the new birth. It is possible that Nicodemus was “born again,” or could have reckoned himself born again, but did not know it. We may conclude that every believer, listed in Hebrews 11, would have been born again. They will see and/or enter the Kingdom. The Spirit is like the wind.

We cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. Nicodemus did not have access to the apostolic epistles, which help to explain the nature of the new birth. They hadn't been written yet.

Jesus expected Nicodemus to know something of the new birth since he was a teacher in Israel. (Some read it as "the" teacher in Israel.) Thus, we should not think the new birth is only for "New Testament" Christians. Jesus did not say, "*now that I have come*, a man must be born again to see the Kingdom." This will make us want to search the Scriptures and see if we can find any writings on the "new birth" in the Old Testament. As you may know, the terms "born again" and "regeneration" are not found in the Old Testament. However, there is a lot said about the forgiveness of sins, the reviving of hearts, and even the giving of new hearts in the Old Testament.

Sometimes it helps to state the obvious. Jesus said that we must be born again in order to see and enter the kingdom. He did not say that anyone needed to be born again in order to repent, count the cost of discipleship, and believe the truth. They are not necessarily interchangeable terms. No one will fully see and/or enter the kingdom of God until they die.

11.6 EZEKIEL—TWO HEARTS

There are many references to the Spirit's working in the Old Testament record. We will not take the time to examine all the ways in which the Spirit was at work in the lives of those who lived before the coming of Christ. In Ezekiel 18, we read where God promised to give a new heart and a new spirit to those in Israel who would repent and turn from their transgressions. This does sound similar to what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus about being born of the Spirit. It is also clear in the texts that this new heart is given *in response* to repentance. It does not say that the new heart would be given *prior to* repentance. It is commonly said in Scripture that repentance precedes healing, washing, and forgiveness. 2 Ch 7:14; Jonah 3:10; John 12:40; Acts 2:38; 3:19

It is clear in Scripture that the Holy Spirit must work upon the soul in order for us to repent; however, it is not clear that this working of the Holy Spirit is an irresistible new birth. Nevertheless, the Calvinist will insist that this new heart is given *prior to* repentance. They assume that the new heart will repent of that which the old heart did wrong.

After his big sins, David prayed that God would create in him a clean heart. This would seem odd if David had a new heart but still needed to pray for a clean one. Thus, the Calvinistic explanation is a little confusing.

God told Israel,

Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live! Ez 18:30b-32

There may be some mystery here, but it is clear in the text that repentance *precedes* the new heart. Turning from sin is a condition that must be met. This prophecy could be referring to anyone who turns from his sin, as well as those Israelites to whom the prophet was speaking. It is not uncommon for Old Testament prophecies to have a dual application. One application is for the people of Israel in an earthly context. Another application, of the same prophecy, could be applied spiritually to every person at all times. We see a similar prophecy in Ezekiel 11:14-21.

One of the difficulties in assuming that Ezekiel was describing the same spiritual re-birth as Jesus, in John 3, is that the prophet spoke of God *taking out* the old heart and spirit. Ez 11:19 I do not know of anyone, who claims to be born again, who also claims to have had their old heart, or sinful nature, completely removed. I would not be surprised if there are a few who make such a claim, but it is the testimony of virtually all Christian believers that their sinful nature continues to weigh them down and influence them to sin. We look forward to the day when we will be completely free from our sinful nature, even if we have to die first.

We understand it to be our duty, as Christians, to put off the old man and put on the new man. Col 3:9-10; Rom 6 Repentance is continual. This is the essence of our practical sanctification. Indeed, the apostle John wrote the following to believers: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” 1 John 1:8 It seems quite evident that the “old heart” won’t be completely taken

away until we get our new and incorruptible bodies. 1 Cor 15:35-54
Make no mistake. It will be utterly taken away but we are stuck with it for now.

Our understanding of time, itself, is often found at the heart of many biblical mysteries and controversies; this may be one of them. Calvinists, and most Protestants, have historically taught that the new birth takes place in a moment of time. The Calvinist teaches that the new birth (regeneration) takes place in an instant of time *before* we can repent. But the prophecy in Ezekiel 18 makes it clear that God will give a new heart and spirit to those who have repented *first*. This is one text, which runs contrary to the Calvinistic teaching that regeneration would precede penitent faith.

The whole context of Ezekiel 18 is “turn and live.” It is not “live and turn.” **God tells the wayward people of Israel, that if they cast away all their transgressions they can get for themselves a new heart and a new spirit. The order is quite clear.** Note also, the people would not produce the new heart. God would produce it and then give it to them. It is not in our power to give ourselves a new spiritual life. It is in our power, by the common grace of God, to change our mind about sin and unbelief. We may be slaves to our sin, but like physical slaves, we can still wish to be freed from the slave owner.

To be fair in all of this, Jeremiah also speaks of God giving the captive people of Judah “a heart to know Me.” In the context of this prophecy, it is not explicitly stated that repentance is a requirement, which must be met for the giving of the new heart. It might be inferred, but it is not explicitly stated. Jeremiah 24:7 We also need to remember that the prophets were not writing a doctrinal treatise, like Paul, in his letter to the Romans. The prophets were often deliberately writing in shadows and parables.

11.7 WHAT MUST I DO TO BE BORN AGAIN?

Whatever it means to be born again, both sides of our debate would agree that we couldn’t make ourselves born again. It is not in our power and we are never commanded to make ourselves born again. Thus, the real question before us is whether there is a requirement, which we must meet before God will make us born again. The Calvinistic answer

to this question is “No. There is no requirement”. We saw the same in their view of reprobation. In their system, there is nothing that anyone can (or should) do to be born again, and there is nothing that anyone can (or should) do to be reprobate. The Calvinist insists that there is absolutely nothing, which God requires of sinners before He makes them born again. They only need to be chosen for it . . . based on nothing in themselves. **Again, God would be making people born again against their present will.** Once again, I trust you can see why they have been called fatalists for centuries. They’ve earned the reputation.

The Calvinist insists that the new birth creates the desire to know God within the dead heart of the elect. It would do so, irresistibly, of course. Here we find the Calvinist splitting some illusional hairs. They will say that God makes us alive in “a secret and unseen way.” In their system, the new birth is *not* brought about by rationally engaging the mind with the truth. The word of God would regenerate the heart *without rationally engaging the mind*. They would not call it magic, but they would call it a miracle. They insist that the new birth is not contingent upon our intellectual reason and contrition. Westminster says that the elect are “altogether passive” in this action. (Chapter 10 Section 2) As we will see, this view contradicts the Scripture, which ties the new birth to our *reception* of the word of God *by faith*. This is a notable weak spot in their system.

Let’s take it a step further. In the Calvinistic system, the elect sinners don’t have to believe the word of God in order to be born again, but somehow they will be born again by exposure to the word of God. This is a dubious and confusing distinction. In their system, the elect must be exposed to the word of God but they cannot savingly receive it, until God, irresistibly works a miracle in their soul. This helps to explain how some Calvinists would teach that an infant could be born again. **Calvinism teaches that sinners do not need to count the cost, repent, believe the truth, or do anything in order to be born of the spirit.** They simply have to be chosen for salvation. The biblical mandate of counting the cost is rendered perfunctory in their system. We saw this in the previous quote by Dr. Sproul:

You don’t come to Christ to be born again. You get born again to come to Christ.

Augustine said the same sort of thing in his discussions of predestination:

Let us, then, understand the calling whereby they become elected, not those who are elected because they have believed, but who are elected that they may believe.⁴

Augustine was confusing Jesus' choice of who would be His twelve apostles with the choice of who would be justified by faith. John 6:70, 13:18, 15:16 This is an important distinction of historical Calvinism. They acknowledge that the elect sinner must somehow be exposed to the Word of God. The Word will then regenerate their heart . . . *but not through believing it.* This, as we have been saying, is because they can't savingly believe the truth because they are dead in sin. This pillar of inference is a distinction that becomes very hard to accept, biblically. It has been said that it is the theologian's prerogative to make distinctions, but sometimes theologians abuse their privilege.

Our non-Calvinist believes that when God forgives us, He essentially makes us born again. Before we are forgiven, we are dead in trespasses and sins. If God imputes your sin to your account then you are dead in sin. This is like Adam, who "died" the day he ate the forbidden fruit. It is also like Paul, when sin was revived by the law and he "died." Gen 2:17; 3:3; Rom 7:9 When the guilt of our sin is transferred to Christ, through faith, then we are "made alive." Thus, the just shall live by faith, on the authority of God's decree. Once we are forgiven, we are "made alive together with Him." God's forgiveness *quickens*. Our sin debt is cancelled and we are "raised" from the dead to newness of life. Paul makes this crucial connection in Colossians 2:13:

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all your trespasses . . .

The doctrine of imputation is essentially the doctrine of regeneration. You could not have justification without being born again and you could not be born again without being justified. They are two ways of describing the same forgiveness.

11.8 THE WORD OF GOD IS THE INSTRUMENT OR SEED OF THE NEW BIRTH

Regardless of whether the new birth comes prior to faith or not, we know that the new birth is brought about by the word of God. Both sides of our debate typically agree that the Word is the instrument of regeneration. The debate is over *how* it works in the heart. It should also be obvious that we could not hear or believe God's word unless He speaks it first. Both sides of our debate agree that God initiates salvation. We love Him because He first loved us. 1 John 4:19

Included in the testimony of virtually all Christians is the awareness that God was pursuing them. It will also be the miserable testimony of those who perish, that they knew *God had pursued them* and they rejected His offers of mercy and His commands to repent. They may have been dead in sin but they knew God was reaching out to them. He pursued them through the law written on their hearts and through the gospel. God's truth may have come to them through the teaching of their parents, friends, and pastors, or simply by reading the Bible.

We have already seen that God also communicates with everyone through the creation. His invisible attributes are clearly seen, by fallen sinners, in the things that are made. Rom 1:20 Creation is even said to be vocal, as the Psalmist says that the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament "utters speech" day after day . . . in every language. Even if you are dead in sin, you still hear this awesome sermon. Ps 19 We don't have to be forgiven to see and hear the message of God's eternal power and wisdom in the things He created.

Although the message of creation and the word written on our hearts is not as detailed as that which comes to us through the canon of Scripture, it is sufficient for a rudimentary faith. **The revelation of nature and conscience is sufficient for saving faith in the contrite, but it is not sufficient for a joyful assurance of salvation.** Rahab was justified by her faith but I doubt she was very sure of it. (Especially if she continued in her stated vocation.) She possessed the Spirit of Christ but she had no specific knowledge of Him. The same would be said of Cornelius before Peter introduced him to Jesus. Acts 10; 11:14

1 Peter 1:22-23 says,

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever . . .

Here, it is pretty clear that the incorruptible and eternal “seed” of the word of God is the means through which we become born again. Even the harlot Rahab, who had no Bible, must have been born again as she is memorialized among the faithful. She had witnessed enough of the creation and enjoyed the law written on her heart. She also heard the truth regarding the Jews’ deliverance from Egypt. This was enough revelation to exercise saving faith in the One and only true God. She did not know anything about Jesus of Nazareth. She lived and died long before He was born in Bethlehem. Joshua 2:9-11

In this text, Peter does not explicitly tell us *when* the new birth occurs in relation to repentance and faith. He does say that they have purified their souls “in obeying the truth through the Spirit.” This suggests that the “washing of regeneration” occurs, as we believe the truth. (Synergistically, if you like.) Titus 3:5 This is the kind of biblical language, which shows the mysterious merging of our responsibility and God’s sovereignty in salvation. We know that the blood of Christ actually purifies us; yet it is only effective in those who can understand and believe the truth. It is not careless of Peter to use this kind of language, which suggests we can purify our own souls. He is being very precise. Our souls do not get washed unless we humbly bring them to the Fount’ of every blessing.

James also speaks to the new birth as it relates to receiving the word. In James 1:18 and 21 we read:

Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

We can glean some more information on the new birth from these texts. First, we see that this bringing forth (or begetting) is by the will of God. In the natural birth, we do not decide to be born. Likewise, in the new birth, God is the source of the new life. He initiates the plan. He has the seed that is necessary for spiritual life. Jesus said, “. . . the words that I speak unto you they are spirit and they are life.” John 6:63 The flesh is unprofitable for spiritual life.

The word translated “brought forth” in James 1:18 carries with it the idea of a birth, or a fatherly begetting. Again, we see in these texts that the word of God is likened unto a seed that fertilizes an egg. It is also like a seed that germinates in the ground. The seed has *already been implanted* in the soil of our hearts. James instructs his readers to lay aside sin and receive that word with meekness, and they too will be saved. This is another way of saying, “repent, and believe the truth.” This sounds much like the texts we read earlier in Ezekiel. James 1:21 is another way of saying, “Repent and God will regenerate you.”

We see the same thing taught in the Parable of the Sower and Seed. Mt. 13 The seed is sown on all kinds of surfaces but only the seed that was sown on the good ground flourished and bore fruit. We know the “good” ground is not good in the sense of righteousness because no one is righteous. The sinners who receive the seed of the word are not necessarily more righteous than the others who failed to bear fruit. The “good” soil in the parable is a penitent heart. It is the heart, which lays aside sin and receives the word in meekness. Again, we see the condition for regeneration is not something that can be boasted of. If we boast of our meekness . . . then it is not meekness.

We see also that it is the word, which has the power to save the soul. It is not our laying aside of sin, or contrite faith, that has the actual power to save. This is the same as we saw in Peter’s statement about being kept by the power of God through faith. 1 Peter 1:5 The Word saves but it does not save unless it is received with meekness. Many people know the word of God but they do not receive it with meekness. They reject it. There must be a humble and permanent reception of the seed, by faith, before it can yield salvation. This would suggest that the new birth occurs when the seed is mixed with faith. (Synergistically, if you like.) The seed, alone, does not regenerate. Faith, alone, does not regenerate. They must be mixed (or united) together.

This biblical principle is brought out in Hebrews 4:2. (This text is also an excellent example of how manuscripts and translations can make a significant difference in how we understand Scripture.) The New King James reads:

For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.

This is how Hebrews 4:2 reads in the he English Standard Version (ESV).

For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because *they* were not united by faith with those who listened.

There seems to be a difference in the two translations. These types of differences in translations can be unnerving to our faith but the context will often help us garner the intended meaning. This is such a place. In Hebrews 3:19, the writer had just said that those who did not enter into the promised “rest” died in the wilderness. The reason was their unbelief. Therefore, it makes more sense, in the context of Hebrews 3, that those Jews who were prohibited from entering the Promised Land did not receive the promise by faith. Thus, they were not united with those who did believe. The promise was not mixed with (or received by) faith. They suppressed the “good news” in an earthly context and it cost them the joy of entering into the Promised Land. When we suppress the truth in an eternal context, it will cost us the eternal blessings promised to Abraham, and all who believe with him. Gal 3:7-9 The word must be mixed (or received) with faith. The seed must be combined with the good soil of a contrite heart. Mt 13:8,23

It is very important to emphasize that the seed *initiates the union*. The soil does not come to the seed. The seed comes to the soil. The word is implanted in every heart by the common grace of God. We love Him because He first loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Our contrite faith is the condition required for regeneration and imputation to occur. It is not in our power to make ourselves born again. We cannot provide ourselves with the washing of the word. Eph

5:26 We merely bring our souls to the shower. We do not provide the blood, which washes away sin.

The text in James suggests that the word is already implanted but salvation is not fully accomplished. It seems clear that the implanted word must be *permanently received* for the new birth to occur. This is like the grafting of a plant. In a contemporary illustration, this would be like an organ transplant that must be accepted by the body before it can be deemed a successful transplant. God places His word in every heart but the word must be united with humble faith to maintain life. Paul teaches that we cannot be sure of our salvation, or the salvation of others, until “Christ is formed” in us. This takes time, both in terms of our understanding of the gospel and our moral conduct. Paul likened it unto childbirth. Gal 4:19-20

This would help us to understand the failure of the seed, which was sown on the wayside, stony ground, and among thorns in the parable. There was life, but it was not permanent. The life was lost by yielding, over time, to the lusts and cares of the world. As infants and small children, we enjoy true life in the mercy of God; much like a patient on a ventilator during surgery. The machine is breathing for him. As we mature in our understanding, we must respond to the truth in faith. God has put the seed of His word in every heart but only those who permanently lay aside their sin and receive the word with meekness will be saved . . . and sure of it. James 1:21

When James says that God has brought us forth “of His own will”, he is not contrasting the freedom of God’s will, to the bondage of man’s will. He is not making a statement about mankind’s utter inability to receive the truth apart from regeneration. He is showing that God has sovereignly set the terms of salvation. He is saying the same thing as the apostle John when he says,

But as many as received Him (Jesus), to them He gave the right to become the children of God, to those who believe on His name; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. John 1:12-13

If God does not implement a plan of salvation then no guilty sinner could be saved. Men did not design the doctrines of salvation, nor do we have the power to impute Christ’s righteousness. Salvation

belongs to the Lord. Ps 3:8 We do not make ourselves born again. We do not redeem ourselves. If we don't like God's plan of salvation then we don't get to make another way. Nevertheless, God has sovereignly decreed that we must be willing recipients of His grace. The will of man cannot over rule the sovereignty of God. God has sovereignly decreed that salvation should come through faith. We see in these verses that receiving Jesus comes *prior to* the right to become the children of God. It is presented as the *required condition* for being called the children of God. The Calvinistic mantra that "regeneration precedes faith" is getting very hard to accept in light of these texts on the new birth. It strains the context here to insist that those who received Jesus were born again first.

It would also strain the context here to suggest that God does not will (or desire) the salvation of every soul. Scripture teaches that we cannot be born again apart from the will of God. No one becomes born again by themselves, no matter how diligent their repentance and faith. God chose to use a handful of Jewish believers to lay the foundation of the Church. They would be a kind of first fruits of His creation. This certainly does not necessarily infer that they were dragged into becoming believers, or apostles.

1 Peter 1:3 gives a little more information on the new birth.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead . . .

Here we see that the new birth comes through the resurrection of Jesus and we certainly played no role in that event. This suggests that the term "born again" can be used, in a broad sense, to describe salvation in its entirety, and not just one particular aspect of salvation. This text is not hard to understand since we are "raised" with Christ. If Jesus was not raised then no one could be raised with Him. This term [begotten again] could be translated as "reborn." In the context, it could be translated as "fathered." Orphans don't adopt new parents. Parents adopt orphans. In human nature, a seed doesn't produce life by itself. It must unite with the egg. Likewise, in germination, the seed must be united with good soil. **In the spiritual re-birth, the seed of**

God’s word only flourishes in the soil of a contrite heart. It is not a heart without sin, but a broken and contrite one.

These are places in Scripture where the Calvinistic assumption that “regeneration precedes faith” meets its Waterloo. Based on these texts, the biblical order must be repentance precedes regeneration (or repentance and regeneration are simultaneous).

11.9 I THINK RATIONALLY . . . THEREFORE, I AM BORN AGAIN (?)

The Calvinistic view requires us to believe that the new birth is not bestowed as the divine response to rational thinking about our estrangement from God. They teach that it is done to you *before* you can think rationally about your estrangement from God. Calvinists would also teach that the new birth does not occur through the combined efforts of the Holy Spirit and our rational thinking. Remember, they teach that the unbeliever knows only disgust and animosity toward the things of God. (Yet as we have seen, George Whitefield concedes that spiritually dead sinners can “tremble” over their sins.) Calvinists insist that the unbelieving mind is impervious to rational thinking about our need for forgiveness. In their understanding of regeneration, the Word does not really engage the natural mind so much as it delivers a new mind, which is only capable of repentance and faith. This new mind cannot fail to repent of what the “old” mind caused. (Again, Calvinism is just plain confusing.)

They further insist that if sinners are “spiritually dead” from birth then they cannot have any godly sorrow for sin until they are born again. The unregenerate could only have *worldly sorrow* over sin. 2 Corinthians 7 does make the distinction between these two kinds of sorrow. One is genuine sorrow over the sin itself; the other is only sorrow over the miserable and embarrassing consequences of our sin. Godly sorrow hates the sin and desires change. Worldly sorrow wants to keep sinning with no consequences.

Calvinists must conclude that Pilgrim, in Pilgrim’s Progress, must have been born again *before* he lost his burden at the cross, and before his name was changed to “Christian.” Not only that, Pilgrim must have been born again before he could be properly grieved over his burden of sin and listen to Evangelist. He would have been born again before

he could understand his “book” and see the “yonder shining light” near the wicket-gate. Pilgrim must have been born again before he even left the City of Destruction. To be consistent, Calvinists must conclude that Pilgrim was born again before the book even begins. This is because the book starts with Pilgrim under the rational conviction of sin that ultimately leads to his entrance into the Celestial City. The Pilgrim’s Progress serves as a wonderful manual on perseverance and assurance but it cannot tell us, precisely, when Pilgrim was born again. This will remain a mystery. Thankfully, Bunyan did not try to explain when “Christian” was born again. He spent the entire story teaching us how to know if we should *reckon* ourselves born again.

Now many Calvinists will concede that the new birth may come a split second before repentance and faith. Therefore, they may appear to be happening at the same time. However, the veteran Calvinist is adamant that regeneration must precede faith. I know of one Calvinistic teacher who claims that if we do not believe that regeneration precedes faith then we don’t understand “anything” about grace.

Our non-Calvinist believes that the Word only regenerates when it is mixed with faith. Calvinism teaches that the Word regenerates without actually believing it. This is one reason why John MacArthur would say:

You can’t teach the Bible to non-believers, they will reject it.

You cannot teach the Scriptures to non-believers.⁵

Nevertheless, as we have seen in the book of Acts, the word “persuaded” is used in the context of preaching the gospel of Christ. Paul would reason with both Jews and Gentiles. He would point the Jews to their own Scriptures and he would use evident reason with the Gentiles to *persuade* them both into faith in Christ. He would rationally make his case to both kinds of unbelievers. Paul said that he spoke the words of truth and reason to unbelievers, yet the Calvinist insists that neither faith nor reason plays any role in the new birth. They are afraid that believers might have something to boast about if their reason played an essential role in their salvation. But Paul did not preach the gospel as if it had some kind of incoherent magic power to persuade . . . apart from reason. The word of the cross is *rational* and that is part of its

power. Acts 28:24 shows the contrast between being persuaded by the truth and disbelieving it. Calvinists fail to see how that contrition is rational but it is not something we could boast in. Acts 13:43;19:8; 28:23-24

When King Agrippa said that Paul had almost persuaded him to be a Christian, Paul did not suggest that Agrippa needed to be born again before he could be persuaded to follow Jesus. In fact, Paul acknowledged Agrippa's knowledge and belief in the Prophets. Agrippa's response, and his interest in the Scriptures, would indicate that he was not "dead in sin" according to the Calvinistic definition. If Agrippa was dead in sin by the Calvinistic definition then he would not have believed the prophets nor could he have been "almost persuaded" to be a Christian. He could not have been sympathetic to Paul's case regarding the Jews who wanted him executed. He would have been filled with animosity towards the Prophets, Christ, and His apostles . . . if the Calvinistic definition of "dead in trespasses and sins" were correct. Acts 26:28

11.10 SEEING THE KINGDOM

In the defense of their position, Calvinists will often point to the fact that Jesus told Nicodemus that we must be born again before we can *see* the kingdom of God. Here, they interpret "seeing" the kingdom as the same as being able to repent and believe. Again, it is helpful to state the obvious: Jesus does not *explicitly* say that we must be born again before we can repent, or be persuaded to believe. It is certainly not clear that Jesus is explaining how the human mind makes choices. In Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus there was no discussion of anyone's radical corruption that would prevent them from believing in the only begotten Son. The fall of Adam is not mentioned in John 3. "Seeing the kingdom" could be understood in more than one way. When Jesus repeated Himself to Nicodemus, He said that we must be born again to *enter* the kingdom. Thus, it stands to reason that seeing the kingdom and entering it are essentially the same things in the realm of the spirit. Here the Calvinist rests heavily on a very particular interpretation of a somewhat veiled statement by Jesus.

This is a good place to repeat our rule for studying Scripture. We should interpret that which is implied in Scripture by that which is clear in Scripture. It is a good rule. If you allow that which might be

implied in Scripture to outweigh that, which is clear, then you can come up with some pretty strange conclusions. (By violating this principle of interpretation, some have come to teach that when humans have sex with angels their babies are damned. This is also how some teach that saved souls will need to use the bathroom in heaven. These are speculations . . . at best. They occur when we wrestle texts from their intended context and read too much between the lines of Scripture.)

We are told that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness, but we are not explicitly told that this was his new birth . . . but it probably was. Gen 15:6 Scripture does not tell us when Abel, Enoch, Noah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Rahab, David, Daniel, or any of the prophets were born again. Nevertheless, Jesus expected Nicodemus to have some understanding of the necessity and nature of the new birth.

Likewise, in the New Testament record, where some conversions to Christ were swift and dramatic, we are never told when anyone was actually born again. It is not clear when the disciples were born again. We may think it is obvious when the apostle Paul was born again, but it is never stated in Scripture. **This should be enough to make us realize that we do not need to know when people are born again to enjoy the hope of salvation.** If we are actually born again before we die, then the tangible proof of the new birth will be the new life.

I believe Scripture teaches that we are born again whenever God permanently forgives our sin. If you can pinpoint the moment in which God forgave you of every sin you have ever committed, and every sin that you will ever commit, then that would be the moment of your new birth. (Good luck with that.) Remember, Jesus instructs us to ask God to forgive us our trespasses as often as we ask for daily bread. Indeed, “right now counts forever.” Remember also, that our *feelings* of guilt and the *feelings* of forgiveness do not always reflect our actual guilt and forgiveness.

At this point some readers may be saying, “This is all well and good but what does it have to do with our debate over election? The answer is this: if the new birth does not irresistibly occur *before* we count the cost, repent, and believe the truth then Calvinism is finished. All forms of real Calvinism are utterly dependant on proving that some form of irresistible and particular grace is required for the elect sinner to repent and believe the truth.

11.11 MORE TEXTS RELATING TO THE NEW BIRTH

Jesus made the following statement and it is often linked to the subject of the new birth. The NKJV reads:

Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted, and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom. Mt. 18:3

Here we have another condition for entering the kingdom and the word translated “converted” is very important. We are told, by the experts, that the word means “turn” or “turn back.” It virtually always implies a *self-determined* changing of directions. This is the only time in the KJV or NKJV that the word is translated as “be converted” [or “are converted”]. Every other time the word is used, it is translated as “turned,” “turn,” “turned back,” or “turned around.” It is the word used to describe Jesus when He turned around to see who touched Him. Mt 9:22 In the context of this text, it implies a self-determined turning from the carnal pride, which fantasizes about being the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, to the humble faith of a child.

It is perfectly logical to assert that there is a *human* condition for salvation, which works in conjunction with *divine* conditions for salvation. Further, it is reasonable to assert that salvation would still be “all of grace” if the requirement is one that can’t be boasted of, and does not save, in and of itself. **I hope you can see how that repentance could be the perfect condition of salvation, yet there would be no boasting on our part. God retains all of the glory for our salvation.**

One reason we should not assume that this “turning” is the same as the new birth is that this turning is something we do ourselves. It is not done to us. Jesus said that we must be born again to see (and enter) the kingdom. The new birth is something that requires God’s authority and power. God, alone, holds the sovereign power of the imputation of sin. This text could easily be translated as, “unless you turn in repentance, and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom.” In Scripture, we are commanded many times, and in many ways, to humble ourselves and turn from sin. We are never commanded to make ourselves born again. That would be absurd. It would be the same as declaring yourself forgiven. It would

be like commanding a seed to germinate new life on its own. As you know, it doesn't work that way. There is nothing in Scripture, which precludes the possibility that we must meet a condition before God will regenerate us.

I can understand why a translator would want to use the words "be converted" instead of "turn back," if he happened to be a Calvinist. This is not the only place where the King James Version, and the NKJV, both swerve in the Calvinistic direction. Nevertheless, "turn back" is more true to the context in Matthew 18. The ESV and the ASV use the word "turn." The NIV says, "... unless you change and become like children." Jesus is talking about humbling ourselves in the context of pride. He is not talking about a supernatural spiritual resurrection. This is about repentance. It is a contrite changing of the mind. We need to "turn back" to the simple and humble faith that we had as children. **Saving faith is the opposite of the vainglorious and self-aggrandizing desire to be the big man on heaven's campus. The purest faith is the antithesis of loving the praise of men.**

There are other terms used in Scripture that allude to the new birth. One, which we have already mentioned, is Titus 3:5

... not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy, He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit . . .

It is generally agreed by both sides of our debate that this text is describing the rebirth, which Jesus was talking about with Nicodemus. This "regeneration" and "renewing" is done by the Holy Spirit, and Jesus did say that we must be born of the Spirit. The new birth is essentially a regenerating, or a return to life through the forgiveness of our sin. Here, we see that regeneration is called a "washing." Washing is not exactly the same as a rebirth or resurrection, but it is a common biblical metaphor for salvation. John 13:8; 1Cor 6:11; Heb 10:22; Rev 1:5 Salvation is much like getting a bath in which all of the stench and stain of sin is washed away. Here, one aspect of salvation is tied to another. The washing of regeneration refers to the washing of the blood of Christ. We are regenerated when sin is no longer imputed to our account. When God forgives us, we are clean. We are seen by God as whiter than snow. We will stand spotless before the Judge, clothed in

the righteousness of Christ. This is great news for anyone battling the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life.

This text does not offer much help in answering the question of which comes first . . . the new birth or repentance and faith. It could support the distinction that faith and regeneration occur at the same time. They would be simultaneous (or co-terminus with respect to time). We do see an important point regarding any possible condition for salvation. If there is a condition, which must be met before God will regenerate (and/or forgive) us, then it is clearly not our works of righteousness. Gladly, both sides of our debate agree on this.

It is also worthwhile to note that the biblical term is *re-generation* and not generation. It infers a return to life from death. Again, we note how Paul said he was alive once without the law. When the law came . . . he died. Rom 7:9 He does not say that this occurred when he was in the Garden of Eden. Paul was never in the Garden of Eden. Paul did not commit Adam's sin. We are not viewed as dead in trespasses and sins until our own sin is imputed to our own account. Again, we are made sinners, but the Bible never says we were born dead in sin. It is an important distinction.

This would be consistent with the position that says we are born sinners but are in a state of grace as children. Sin is not imputed to infants and children until they can be held accountable to the law written on their hearts and revealed in Scripture. Therefore, they are viewed to be alive unto God. Re-generation returns us to the place of life that we enjoyed in childhood. Sin is no longer imputed to our account. Willful and un-confessed sin leaves us dead in sin before God.

11.12 JOHN 6—THE DRAWING OF THE FATHER

If you have any experience with the debate over election then you know that John 6:44 is always in the middle of the discussion. Here is what Jesus said to those Jews who doubted that He was the Living Bread, which came from heaven:

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. John 6:44-45

I include verse 45 because it is often neglected in the explanation of verse 44 . . . but shouldn't be. Verse 45 explains the nature of the drawing that Jesus is referring to, and it is often omitted by Calvinists. It doesn't fit well with their typical explanation of this "drawing."

The Calvinistic assumption here is that this drawing of the Father is an effectual calling and/or the new birth. (Note: The distinctions between effectual calling and regeneration are not uniformly clear among Calvinists. There seems to be some overlap between the two concepts. See the Westminster Larger Catechism Q 67 on Effectual Call.)⁶ As mentioned, you will often hear Calvinists refer to this drawing as the "effectual calling." This is a more palatable way of describing what would essentially be an *irresistible dragging*. It's a pretty big assumption, especially in light of the texts we have already seen. A "birth" and a "drawing" are not the same things. A "quicken"ing" and a "teaching" are not at all the same either. You can't "teach" a dead person anything. You have to be alive to "learn" something.

First, let's note the obvious: Jesus did not say, "No man can come to me unless he is born again (or effectually called) first." He did not say that no man could come to Him unless his will is renewed and "powerfully determined." If the text read, "No man can come to me unless the Father *irresistibly* draws him," then the Calvinistic interpretation would be justified. But the text doesn't say that. Jesus is describing a kind of grace that is given by the Father, which compels and enables people to come to Him, and without which they could not come to Him. This gracious drawing is described as a *hearing and learning*.

Jesus is making it clear that we can't come to Him in our own strength, goodness, or wisdom. We need grace. The question is over the nature of the grace that is needed. It is evident that we could not specifically know about Jesus unless we are told about Him. Rom 10:14

Historical Calvinists believe this text proves that God does not desire, and genuinely provide for, the salvation of every sinner. They assume that if God really desired to save every sinner, apart from any independent condition, then He would draw every sinner to Jesus. In commenting on this text, in his lecture entitled "Man's Radical Fallenness," in the Chosen by God teaching series, R.C. Sproul said,

God Himself supplies the necessary condition to come to Jesus.⁷

This interpretation of Jesus' statement demonstrates how a Calvinist will allow the appearance of a human condition for salvation; yet still teach that salvation is essentially unconditional and irresistible. Here again, we see how sentences can be interpreted differently. Dr. Sproul is taking advantage of a double meaning. He has left just enough out of this sentence so that it could be agreed upon by Calvinist and non-Calvinist alike . . . but not in the same sense. There is one very important word missing from his statement that prevents it from being altogether, and only, Calvinistic. You should know what the missing word is by now. That's right . . . the missing word is *irresistibly*. If R.C. had said, "God Himself *irresistibly* supplies the necessary condition to come to Jesus" then it would teach the Calvinistic view more accurately.

But adding the word "irresistibly" to his statement would obliterate our faith in Christ as a truly independent condition of salvation. **Calvinists really don't believe there is an independent human condition for salvation.** Remember what G. I. Williamson said about our eternal destinies:

But what is of cardinal importance is to recognize that God's sovereign determination of the destinies of the souls of men is not conditional.⁸

Note again, Tim Keller's comment about lost sheep.

The Shepherd has to do *everything* for the sheep.⁹

We must respond to this, again, by noting that Jesus is never called our "Believer" . . . nor does He repent for us. According to Scripture, repentance and faith is something that *we* must do in order to be saved. If it can't be done without God's irresistible outside influence, then it cannot be done volitionally (or independently).

True Calvinists really do believe in irresistible grace but they are often reluctant use the term. It's too clear. Calvinism survives on its ability to slightly obscure its basic understanding of salvation . . . not state it plainly. A little ambiguity is a good thing. The use of the double meaning is essential to the success of the Reformed views of grace. It is expected that we dutifully play along

with the omissions and double meanings. (This is sort of like those who follow Benny Hinn & Co. It is expected that their followers play along with the hokey part of the show for the sake of that which is true.)

As a non-Calvinist, I could agree with R.C.'s statement because I believe the way of faith was supplied by God, and the law of God is written on everyone's heart. The heavens declare the glory of God. They teach. God initiates salvation in a universal sense and individually. If God does not devise and initiate the plan of salvation then no guilty sinner would be saved. If He does not reveal the truth then no one could ever receive it.

We all should agree that God must draw individuals to Christ before they can come to Him. It is obvious that we must hear about Jesus before we could come to Him. We hear the truth because God first speaks it. God must first "implant" the truth on our hearts before we could respond to it. James 1:21 We are able to stand upon God's promises because He first made them. No one can sincerely say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. 1 Cor 12:3

Jesus told the Apostles that He would send the Helper, who would convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. John 16:7-11 The Spirit of God is constantly working through the law, and the gospel, to draw sinners to Him. No one ever came to a saving knowledge of the truth in the Old Testament era unless they were drawn to it, and no one will come to Christ, now, if they are not drawn. **Jesus is not implying that there are reprobate souls who are not drawn to the truth . . . but the Calvinist is.** Jesus is not saying that those who ultimately reject the truth will not be drawn to it. He is saying that we cannot come to Him unless the Father draws us. This is a clear principle of Scripture. Every believer should be thankful to God for his or her faith. It would not be possible without the grace of God. We should be especially grateful if we have had the opportunity to hear about Jesus. Many live and die without hearing His name. The church must stay engaged in the great commission. It is a tragedy when someone does not hear about Jesus.

The difference here is that non-Calvinists believe that the grace, which is necessary to come to Jesus, is included in the common grace that is given to every person. Also, our non-Calvinist believes that the truth may still be rejected by those who are drawn. This understanding

permits the true liberty of choice that makes the most sense of God's desire for all men to be saved, and yet, still justly punish the impenitent. The guilty sinner is truly able to either "learn" the truth, or reject the truth. This view makes the most sense of the universal call to repent. If God only draws some to the truth then why would he have us command all men everywhere to repent? Acts 17:30

Again, a less ambiguous way for a Calvinist to state his case would be,

God Himself irresistibly supplies the necessary condition to come to Jesus, and it works irresistibly in the hearts of the chosen sinners, who must choose to come to Jesus. They could do no other.

That would be Calvinism more clearly stated, and this is another example of how carefully Calvinistic teachers must present their doctrine in order to obscure the fatalism, and deflect attention away from their doctrine of reprobation. The objectionable parts should only be inferred, or omitted entirely.

I do not think any honest Calvinist could argue with the substance of this description of their position. They would only object to its *presentation*. It is not incorrect. It is just too clear. It blows the cover off the fatalism. It is too much information at once. The full impact of their system must never make a direct hit on an inquirer into Calvinism. It is best to teach Calvinism incrementally. You must divide and conquer. You can win with a lot of jabs but knockout punches rarely connect. **A direct attack of plain speech will typically overwhelm the unsuspecting disciples and they will likely continue to trust their instincts regarding love, freedom, and justice. That one word . . . irresistible . . . makes all the difference in the world.**

You can probably see why the most influential Calvinists are pretty intellectual and gifted communicators. The more they emphasize "irresistible grace" . . . the less they will be taken seriously. The more they minimize the language of "irresistible grace" . . . the more they will be accepted. They must sound like non-Calvinists whenever they can. Such is their dilemma. This may be the reason that we sometimes see a spike in the number of Christians who might claim to be Calvinists. They are not getting the whole picture. Therefore, they are a kind of halfway Calvinist. They like the thought of being chosen by God, and saved by grace, but they ignore the necessary result of true Calvinism.

The necessary result is that some babies must be born with absolutely no hope of eternal life. Sovereign election seems cool, but sovereign reprobation . . . not so much.

There are some fairly blunt Calvinists who simply stick to the bottom line conclusions. They don't take the time for a sophisticated and nuanced defense. As a result, they have never had much influence. (And that is a good thing.) Typical Calvinists will always do their best to remind us of our "responsibilities" even though their doctrine transforms our responsibilities into inevitable responses. It is more than "determined." It is a Christian form of fatalism.

In the same teaching series, R.C. suggests that the "drawing" of John 6:44 is better understood as a "dragging." Nevertheless, he stops short of recommending that the text should actually be translated as "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me [drags] him . . ." He explains that the Greek word [helkuo] is the same word used in James 2:6, and Acts 16:19, where it is translated as "dragged." Those two contexts show clearly that the word [helkuo] implies that people were compelled into court, and to a marketplace, *against their will*. They were helpless to prevent it. They were dragged by irresistible force. R.C. explains,

The force of this verb is the force of divine compulsion.¹⁰

Again, this is not as clear as saying, "The force of this verb is the force of *irresistible* divine compulsion." Omitting that one word makes a big difference. Everyone agrees that God compels us to believe the truth. Our conscience compels us to confess our sins and repent. God certainly compels us to believe in Jesus when we hear the gospel, but this does not mean that the compulsion must be irresistible.

Dr. Sproul also points out that the same word is used in John 4:11 in the context of drawing water out of a well. He explains that one does not get water out of a well by calling for it to come up, or by trying to persuade the water to come out of the well. The water must be drawn by an act of superior physical force from the outside. Just as water must be physically compelled out of a well, "divine compulsion" would be required for a sinner to come to Jesus. His case is well stated but then he is left with the monumental task of trying to make faith in Jesus still appear to be "free," "independent," and/or "voluntary."

We saw the same problem with Mark Driscoll's story about pulling his daughter from the path of an oncoming truck. There is no room for meaningful repentance and faith in their system. Again, we can't always compare spiritual force to physical force.

In short, the nuanced Calvinist will teach that God irresistibly drags the chosen sinners to the place where they *must* voluntarily repent and trust Christ. They could do no other. If that makes sense to you then you will make a fine Calvinist.

Their problem is obvious. That which is irresistible cannot be voluntary. If you can't resist repenting then you aren't doing it voluntarily. If you volunteered to coach your kid's Little League team then you weren't irresistibly compelled to coach the team. You could have turned down the opportunity. There may have been significant pressure applied to coach the team, and there may have been consequences for not coaching the team, but it was not "irresistibly determined" that you must choose to coach the team.

It is no wonder that it takes a book by Jonathan Edwards to defend the Calvinistic opinion. Not many others could, and even Edwards could not do it in simple language. "Dragged" and "voluntary" are opposite terms. They are not compatible, especially when the "dragging" comes first and irresistibly causes the so-called "free will" faith in Christ.

The "primitive" Calvinist who simply scoffs at the notion of free will is being more true to their system. "Nuanced" Calvinists merely present it better by creating a philosophical and theoretical fog over how we make choices.

The Jews, to whom Jesus was talking, in John 6, thought they knew God. They thought God was their Father. They assumed that they were the true flock of God's sheep. John 10:26-30 Jesus was constantly explaining that He was one with the Father and these Jews were constantly resisting it. Later, Jesus tells them that if God were their Father then they would love Him because He proceeded forth and came from God. John 8:42-47 Jesus labored the point of His unity with the Father throughout His ministry. You can't have one without the other, but many of the Jews were trying. Jesus was saying that these Jews would not come to Him, as the Son, because they had not learned from the Father. Only those who have been taught *and learned* from the Father will follow Jesus, the Son.

Jesus had just said, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.” John 6:37

Here is an important point in understanding the biblical salvation. We must belong to the Father in order to belong to the Son. John 17:6 Those who desire to belong to Jesus must also belong to the Father . . . first. Jesus is the Truth. He said, “Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice”. John 18:37 Therefore He will not be attractive to those who are not believers in the truth which is written on their hearts and in Scripture. If you are not humbled by God’s magnificent creation, or you are not humbled by the law written on your heart, then you will not be impressed with Jesus. His sacrifice will mean little to you, and He will not be your Savior.

The point, which Jesus was constantly trying to get through to the Jews, who doubted Him, was that they really doubted and rejected the Father. If they had been true believers in YHWH then they would have been believers in Jesus. They thought they were in God’s fold because they were born Jewish. Jesus labored to correct them . . . often. They thought they were the “Israel of God” but in reality, they were merely “Israel after the flesh.” We have already seen this distinction in Scripture, especially in Romans 9. Rom 9:6; Gal 6:16; 1 Cor 10:18

11.13 THE NATURE OF THE DRAWING

Jesus does not say that this drawing is universal. He does not say that it is not universal. He certainly does not say, explicitly, that it is irresistible. In verse 45, Jesus alludes to Isaiah 54:13, which speaks of “children who shall all be taught by the LORD.” Jesus essentially defines this “drawing” when He says it is done in those who have “heard and learned from the Father.” Who comes to Jesus? Those who have “heard and learned” from the Father. **Thus, there is an element of independent human responsibility within this drawing.** It is reasonable to think that this is the same lesson to which Paul was referring in Romans 1 and 2. That which may be known of God is manifest before all men . . . for God has shown it to them. I believe Jesus is referring to the common “teaching” that God gives to all men when He writes the law on our hearts and gives us our conscience. Every person sees the creation and has a conscience, but not every person is irresistibly compelled to heed their conscience.

Psalm 25:8-9 tells us that the Lord “teaches sinners in the way” and we are told which sinners are taught the way. It is the humble . . . those who fear the Lord. In Psalm 18, David says that the Lord will save the humble people, but will bring down haughty looks. This, of course, sounds much like the famous text in Habakkuk 2,

Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him, but the just shall live by his faith.

Every sinner is exposed to the divine “curriculum,” but not every sinner will *learn* its lessons. In addition to the drawing of nature and conscience, this “drawing” would also include any exposure that we may have to the Scriptures. This grace would certainly include the myriad of lessons that every Jew had heard concerning the truth of God. Jesus refers to the bread received by the Jews in the wilderness. The manna in the wilderness was given to all of the Jews but they were not compelled to eat it. Some even managed to find fault with it. These Jews, who rejected Jesus, would have been among those who complained about the manna and wanted to worship the golden calf. They were not attracted to Jesus because He is one with the Father and they really didn’t like the Father.

Obviously, no one would have been able to eat the manna if it did not come from heaven first. Likewise, we would not be able to come to Jesus if we were not first drawn by the Father. Jesus is the bread of heaven, which is given to the world, but we are not irresistibly compelled to “eat his body.” John 6:35, 55-58 Jesus explains that He is the living bread that comes down from heaven. Believing in Him is likened unto eating bread. This bread yields *eternal* life whereas the manna in the wilderness only kept the people alive biologically. Those who come to Jesus for salvation know they need a Savior. They learned it from God the Father. The rich young ruler had heard the truth but he had not yet *learned* it. We know that some Jews and some Gentiles welcomed Jesus as the Messiah and the only begotten Son of God. They were led by the Spirit and taught by the Father.

Jesus’ explanation does not suggest that this drawing is some kind of instantaneous supernatural event . . . like the resurrection of Lazarus. The drawing is a “teaching” and “learning.” Teaching and learning both engage our minds, and they generally take some time.

The new birth is not a “teaching” in the Calvinistic sense. **Again, the new birth, in their system, is a sudden and supernatural event, which does not rationally engage the lost sinner’s mind, like the resurrection of Lazarus.** Thus, we find the Calvinistic view at odds with a text that is often used to defend their position.

In Galatians 3:24, Paul explains that the Law of God is a “tutor” who brings us to Christ. Tutors teach and they don’t mess around. In Romans 7, Paul elaborates on this as he explains how the commandments stirred the restlessness in his own heart. This restlessness is designed to draw us to faith in Christ, who reconciles us to God. He brings peace to the guilty conscience. The law simultaneously reveals both the uncompromising holiness of God and our sinfulness.

The message of the cross also teaches God’s holiness and our sinfulness, but there is even more contained in the message of the cross. The cross also teaches us the amazing grace of God. The Law does not teach the mercy of God like the cross does. The law reveals the specifics of our sin. The cross reinforces the seriousness of our sin and provides the remedy.

This combination of God’s goodness and our restless guilt leads us to Christ. Paul said that the goodness of God leads us to repentance. Rom 2:4 The “drawing” of John 6:44 and the “leading” of Romans 2:4 are both so strong that we might use the word “drag” to describe them, but neither would be a literal dragging by irresistible spiritual force. The strength of the verb “leads” [ag o] in Romans 2:4, is also determined by the context. We might say that the smell of the cookies “led,” or “drew,” me into the kitchen. We might also say we were led, or drawn, into an argument. We might also say we “led” the horses into a barn. Each usage conveys an *increasing intensity*, yet each use is appropriate. The same word has different meanings in different contexts. Remember, sometimes words have two meanings. We must rightly divide them.

In John 5:44, Jesus said to the Jews who sought to kill Him:

How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God?

Here, once again, we see a crucial point in the nature of saving faith. It is humble and contrite faith. Saving faith values the honor of God more than the honor of our peers. Their pride prohibited these Jews from coming to Christ. It was not because God did not choose them before the foundation of the world to be irresistibly humbled. They can come to Jesus . . . as soon as they learn from the Father. They must accept their great need for the goodness of God and *humble themselves*. James 4:10; 1Pet 5:5-6 If they do . . . they won't be boasting about it.

11.14 THE DRAWING OF THE LAW

Those who end up in hell will admit that they often experienced the drawing of God's law through their conscience. In addition, many will have heard the gospel of Christ. They will have felt the love of God tugging at their hearts. They will acknowledge that the Spirit had worked in their hearts, convincing them of sin. They will bear witness to their ability to humble themselves and repent. This will serve to justify the severity of their punishment. They will confess that they knew the truth . . . and spurned it. They exchanged the truth for a lie and knew what they were doing. They did not want to retain the knowledge of God. Rom 1-2

Those who end up in hell will not suffer because they were completely ignorant of God's will. They will remember being under the conviction of sin and the great lengths, they would go to escape or ease the conviction. They will be without excuse. God's law works through the conscience to draw everyone to Himself. Psalm 19 speaks of the glory of the natural creation. Creation literally preaches a universal message, in every language, about the brilliance and power of God. Psalm 19 also says,

The law of the LORD is perfect, converting [returning/restoring] the soul.

In addition, Psalm 19 says the commandment of the LORD "enlightens the eyes." We need to remember that there are aspects of the law, which are written on every heart, and the law is *spiritual* in nature. Rom 7:14 In spite of our sinful inclinations, as the children of Adam, the moral law of God works to draw every soul by teaching us His ways. Everyone

will know that the Creator should be trusted. Everyone possesses the capacity for spiritual things, in this sense.

The ungodly will try all sorts of things to ease the burden of their conscience. Some will drive themselves at their work in order to get rich, or be seen as disciplined and successful. Others look to sports, television, and movies to cope with their unbelief. They hope entertainment can tranquilize them to sleep every night. Others take pills or drink. Some just give up and give themselves over to all kinds of self-indulgence. Many, like the rich young ruler, try to find relief by doing the right things and keeping the law. But no amount of good can offset one sin, nor can it erase the burden and curse of original sin. Again, this “drawing” of the law on our conscience is so powerful that it may seem like an “irresistible dragging.” But it’s not.

When we begin to sin, willfully, the sting of conscience may keep us awake at night. If we persist in that sin, the pain of our conscience becomes a dull ache that we can live with. Eventually our conscience doesn’t even bother us any more, and we wrongly assume that God is OK with our life. Christians will often give testimony of how they were burdened under the load of their sin and they were drawn to the cross, like a thirsty deer to a stream. It was the only place where they could find relief, and find it they did . . . to their everlasting joy and peace.

Paul’s confessed dilemma in Romans 7 describes the struggle of every person who has a physical body and a functioning conscience. We look within ourselves and we see two factions (or laws) at war. That which is within us by virtue of Adam’s fall constantly battles against that which is within us by virtue of the common grace of God. Christians and non-Christians alike testify of the conflict that rages within us. I knew this battle before I knew about Jesus and I still experience it now as a Christian believer.

We see an example of this in the contrite confession of the thief on the cross, next to Jesus. He admitted that he deserved to die. He wasn’t trying to be saved from the earthly consequences of his sinful life. He wanted to be reconciled to God. [Luke 23:41](#) The Christian believer finds hope and relief because he understands that Christ has taken the punishment due his sins. Sincere believers are like King David in the loss of his child and the penitent thief on the cross. Believers accept death and the earthly consequences of their sin as rightly deserved. The

true believer is concerned about the pursuit of righteousness for the highest of all possible motives. That motive is the honor and pleasure that God receives when we reflect his holy, just, and good character. The true believer accepts the blame for his sin, takes his earthly lumps for it, and is grateful that he will never have to endure the full penalty, which is due his sin. This is the spirit of saving faith.

I don't think there is enough evidence in John 6 to support the claim that this "drawing" is a supernatural regeneration. Nor is it an effectual calling that is utterly irresistible. Jesus is teaching that men cannot come properly to Him unless they have been drawn (or taught) by the Father. We must belong to the Father before we can be given to the Son. The Calvinist is trying to make an explicit teaching out of a possible inference that runs contrary to other texts. We will be looking at some of those texts in the next chapter.

11.15 A FAMOUS STAR ILLUSTRATES THE DRAWING

The record of the magi (wise men) who saw the star and followed it to Bethlehem serves as a helpful illustration of coming to Christ. There is no need to assume that these men were being "dragged" to come and worship the newborn King of Kings. But there can be no doubt that they were being divinely *drawn*. It just strains the definition (and spirit) of the term "worship" to think they could not have ignored the star and gone about their normal activities. Even as people from a foreign country, we see God at work in their hearts and minds. They came to Jesus. The star did not drag them to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem. It drew them . . . it led them. It did not forcibly compel them to come and worship the Christ. However, they would not have found Jesus on their own. They needed to be drawn to Him. So do we.

It is also important to note, in light of our discussions of Romans 9, that these wise men were not Jewish. They were not included in the ethnic aspects of the covenant with Abraham, but they were included in the spiritual aspects of the covenant. They had learned from the Father *before* they knew the Son. Mt 2

I know this begs a question for the most inquisitive among us. The question is: "What made them 'wise men' who responded to the drawing of God?" We can't say with certainty, any more than a Calvinist could answer why they think they were chosen for salvation and not others.

Some questions will remain un-answered. The Bible does not pretend to answer all of our questions. We do know this about the true worship of God: it takes humility and one cannot be proud of true humility. This understanding is far better than the Calvinistic conclusion that some people are born reprobate, with absolutely no hope of being forgiven for their sins, which would be the inevitable result of Adam's sin in the Garden.

11.16 THE DRAWING POWER OF JESUS ON THE CROSS

There is another use of the same word translated "draw" [hel'kuo] in John 12:32. Jesus said, "And I, if I am lifted up will draw all [people] to myself." I have not heard of any Calvinists who think this should be translated by saying that Jesus will "drag" all people to Himself. (They would probably say that Christ's death on the cross will drag *all kinds* of people. Both Jews and Gentiles.)

This text describes another force that brings us to Christ and it is found in Christ himself. There is a divine attraction found in the cross of Christ for those who feel the restlessness of a guilty conscience. It is the attraction of divine love and mercy. Indeed, the goodness of God leads us to repentance. Rom. 2:4 Isaac Watts said it well:

Was it for crimes that I have done He groaned upon the tree? Amazing pity, grace unknown, and love beyond degree.¹¹

Some skeptics think the message of the cross is a primitive religious tale of "cosmic child abuse." The cross is certainly gruesome and it may be primitive, but there is something about the message of the cross that strikes us deeply. Sin is a primitive, timeless, and global problem. It requires a primitive, timeless, and global solution. Many religions involve sacrifices. Only one "religion" has God, Himself, making (*and being*) the sacrifice. It makes sense that God would come to us and fix our mess. There is something very *parental* about the cross. A loving Father would not quickly, and mercilessly, dispatch any of His "offspring" into permanent punishment, even if they deserved it. It makes sense that the God of love would go to great lengths to prevent our eternal destruction. It makes sense that the real God would be both severely just and severely merciful.

The cross is unique among the religions and philosophies of the world. Virtually every attribute of God's perfection is on display at the cross. The holiness of God is on display. The justice of God is on display. The love of God is on display. The cross demonstrates the perfect combination of the divine attributes, and it powerfully draws the hearts and minds of sinners. This would not be possible if God had not permitted the entrance and spread of evil.

We know, also, that the message of the cross *repels*. The unbeliever thinks its foolishness. 1 Cor 1:18 Jesus says it draws, and Paul says it is foolishness to them that perish. This is not a contradiction. It is the dual working of the gospel in the hearts of sinners. The humble are drawn . . . the proud are disgusted. The believer repents and worships, but the skeptic mocks and becomes harder. It has been well said that the same sun, which melts the ice, hardens the clay.

I think these "drawings" explain why many Christians become smitten with the Calvinistic position. The influences that drew us to Christ seemed so strong that they felt virtually "irresistible." Again, I have yet to meet a Christian who did not feel that God was pursuing them; yet on the other hand, I have also met many non-Christians who "know" that God has pursued them, but they continue to resist. They may be dead in their sins but they have the spiritual wherewithal to know that God is drawing them to the Truth.

If these influences are literally irresistible, then our love for God becomes truly impossible. Love is best exercised, voluntarily, in spite of the ability to hate. This is how God loves us. Nobody could "irresistibly compel" God to love the world, but He chose to anyway. John 3:16; Rom 5:8; 1 John 4:10,19 The extreme kind of determinism within the Calvinistic system emasculates any obedience to the great commandment. God is robbed of volitional worship if it is irresistibly wrought in the heart.

Regardless of the Calvinistic denials, if the new birth necessitates saving faith, then our response becomes one of the physical machine or inevitable reaction. This is not the language of the biblical gospel. **An irresistible faith could not be a faith working through love.** Gal 5:6 The sinners who humble themselves in response to the pressure of the law and the attraction of the cross find eternal mercy. Those who resist get what they deserve. *Each could do either.* Grace is preserved and true love is protected from the intellectuals who feel they must

reduce it to some kind of involuntary Pavlovian response, in order to protect us from salvation by works. The work of the Holy Spirit and the resistance of the flesh cannot be compared to the force of gravity or measured like air pressure. They are spiritual phenomena. Natural laws do not apply.

Calvinism does teach grace. It is a benevolent system for the chosen. But it would be benevolent force. Calvinism betrays the universal call of the gospel with a kiss. Don't be fooled. In their system, one should not think that we play a role in our faith any more than a newborn infant plays a role in breathing. In their system, God irresistibly gives all the apparatus for faith and the "spiritual newborn" cannot refuse to believe. **It is an inevitable reaction that is made to appear as a bona fide choice between two viable options.** It emasculates the doctrine of justification by faith alone. It renders the human condition of salvation into a divine condition. They believe that in order for God to get all the glory for salvation, then it must be entirely *irresistible*.

(And yes, I am sick of writing that word over and over again. I know it is wearisome . . . but no apologies. I may need to keep writing "irresistible" it until it oozes out of your ears. It is like changing diapers. It's a dirty job but it has to be done . . . and done frequently. I don't want my reader to ever forget what Calvinistic predestination is all about. There are two terms that separate the Calvinistic doctrines of salvation from the biblical doctrines of salvation. One is "unconditional election" and the other is "irresistible grace." These terms, as the Calvinists use them, have got to go.)

11.17 IT IS ALL ABOUT THE WORD "IRRESISTIBLE"

It doesn't matter how many alleged, or secondary human conditions, you add to the plan of salvation; if the elect are unconditionally chosen to be saved, and every essential step of the process is utterly irresistible, then the whole thing is irresistible. Any so-called "conditions" would merely serve as window dressing. They are feeble attempts to restore the intended meaning back into our existence. The typical Calvinist's emphasis on the "means of grace"

only serves to obscure the fatalism. The elect could only choose life and the reprobate could only choose death. It's really pretty simple.

It is one thing to say that God overcomes our lust and pride by revealing both the terror of His wrath and the sincerity His love. It is another thing, altogether, to say that God, *irresistibly*, overcomes our lust and pride by revealing both the terror of His wrath and the sincerity of His love. The one captures the spirit of the gospel and the other quenches it. The one magnifies the depth of God's love and the other distorts it. We can't explain the mystery of repentance by some kind of deterministic behavioral formula, which attempts to show how spiritual choices are made. We don't need to. I enjoy science and the study of God's creation, but we don't need physics lessons, or the theories of B.F. Skinner, to help us understand the invisible things of the Spirit.

Calvinism cuddles with the secular behavioral scientists who teach that *all* of our sinful behavior is inevitably determined by influences beyond our control. The skeptic, therefore, assumes that we cannot be justly held responsible for our sin, because it can't be prevented. He thinks he has found the loophole by which he can escape the guilt and shame of sin. He squirms to free himself from God's righteous judgment by denying our actual culpability. This is where the Calvinist and secular scientist must part ways. The Calvinist has *no problem* holding people fully responsible for committing sins which they could not possibly have prevented . . . or didn't actually commit. **Remember, a real Calvinist believes that Esau was ultimately left for destruction in hell because of the inevitable effects of a sin that he did not actually commit. A real Calvinist believes that you could be eternally damned even if you never actually sinned once in your entire life.**

Instead of faith being a contrite, loving, and truly voluntary response to the love of God, the Calvinist essentially redefines faith as an inevitable, mechanistic, and reflex response to the stimulus of regenerating grace. They would never use those terms, but they accurately describe the concept they are teaching. Try as he might, even the brilliant Jonathan Edwards could not pull off a defense of their position that is adequate and coherent to the average Christian. Calvinists offer this complicated and convoluted treatment of the "freedom" of the will, and when we don't understand it, or agree with

it, they typically suggest that our “Pelagian” pride inhibits us from getting it right. (It couldn’t possibly be that we have a genuine problem with the notion that God punishes people, in eternal hell, for that which they had no control.)

11.18 A LOVING FAITH YIELDS THE HIGHEST EXPRESSION OF WORSHIP

In Galatians 5:5-6 Paul says:

For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

This is a wonderful text, which teaches the nature of saving faith. Saving faith *works through love*. It does not work through ceremony, tradition, or even law. It does not work in the heart like physical laws of cause and effect. Saving faith is a spiritual endeavor. If one person loves another, it does not guarantee, by cause and effect, that the love will be returned at all . . . let alone in equal proportion. I’m afraid the Beatles were wrong about this. The love you take is not always equal to the love you make . . . especially for God. When God demonstrates His love towards us, it does not necessarily mean that the love will be returned. When the sun shines on the earth, it inevitably affects the temperature of the earth; however, God’s love for sinners does not guarantee that we will be grateful and love Him back. Saving faith and love for God go hand in hand. Those with great love for God have great faith in Him.

It does not say much for the glory of God to suggest that the only way He can get fallen sinners to trust and love Him is to essentially re-create them in such a way that they could not fail to trust and love Him. When we describe salvation as essentially the same thing as God causing rocks to praise Him, we disparage the glory of God’s love. Again, God could have done that the first time with Adam and avoided sending anyone to hell. **Instead, God has wonderfully created a world where the highest love is possible, but we must acknowledge the risk of evil that inevitably comes with it.**

How can it be said that the elect truly trust and love God if they could do no other? It is wonderful that God could cause the rocks to cry out with His praise, but should we pretend that the rocks would know what they were doing? Wouldn't God receive more honor if the rocks praised Him without being "divinely compelled" to praise Him? If God were to compel the rocks to cry out with His praise, He would also need to give them the ability to remain silent, for their praise to be the *highest* expression of worship. By attempting to protect grace from works, Calvinism contradicts the nature of trust and the nature of love. It reduces our worship to that of a rock, which is divinely compelled to worship. The glory and honor is not the same.

Love rejoices in the truth. 1 Cor 13:6 It is unthinkable that God, who is both Truth and Love, would not want someone to believe Him and love Him. John 14:6; 1 John 4:8 The Calvinist simply cannot render a plausible explanation of how God could create mankind to love and trust Him, yet never give some people the ability to do either. What kind of God would create people to destroy them for that which they had no control? Again, I hope you can see that if Calvinists are wrong about the imputation of Adam's guilt then their whole system sinks.

11.19 THE NATURE OF SPIRITUALITY

If we were irresistibly compelled to do the right thing . . . it would cease to be the "right thing." It could not be a moral or spiritual "decision." It should not even be called a choice. If the regenerated sinner can no longer reject the truth then it becomes a mockery of the term "choice." Faith would merely be the inevitable thing . . . a cause and effect function. Worship from the heart would not be possible. The same is true of trust. If we are irresistibly compelled to trust someone . . . then it is not trust. **When we apply strict deterministic principles to moral and spiritual choices, they cease to be moral and spiritual choices.** They are reduced to physical "cause and effect" issues. Coming to Christ would be no different from the warming and illuminating effect the sun has on the earth. This would make a nice metaphor, like the parable of the lost sheep, but it could not describe a sinner who flees to the cross for mercy. The Calvinistic doctrine of "irresistible grace" contradicts the nature of spirituality.

Other “spiritual” issues work the same way. As parents, we are pleased to hear our children say “thank you.” We are far more pleased to hear our children say “thank you,” without being commanded to, or threatened. We would like to think that they are truly grateful. We can usually coerce them into saying the words but we cannot make them truly grateful. I think we all understand the difference.

Question: Which gives God more glory: When we thank Him in spite of the ability to be ungrateful, or when we thank Him because He has made it impossible for us to be ungrateful? I really believe the answer is self-evident. A charitable donation is most meaningful when it is voluntary and sacrificial. Gifts that are given out of a sense of obligation are far less honorable than those given without any pressure to give. Paul taught this when he said that God loves a cheerful giver. 2 Cor. 9:5-7 We might use the term “taxes” for the giving of money that is not voluntary. Gifts cease to be gifts as soon as they become mandatory. If a birthday gift is given entirely out of a sense of obligation then it loses its glory as a gift. If a sacrifice were irresistibly coerced then it would have no glory at all. It would be silly to call it a sacrifice. Calvinists agree to this point when teaching the voluntary nature of the sacrifice of Christ, but they won’t apply it to our love and faith toward God. I suppose they are afraid we will all become Catholics or Protestant legalists.

Confession of sin works the same way. If we need to be threatened into an apology then the apology is suspect. This is the unwelcome result of preaching the gospel with excessive threats of hell and condemnation. People will have a faith, which works only by fear . . . and not by love. When the “altar call” becomes a carnal intimidation of children (and adults) then it is more trouble than help. We may hope these preachers have good intentions, but they are working, unwittingly, for the other side. When they coax an insincere confession out of someone who does not realize the love behind the cross, then they are sowing confusion, at best. At the worst, they are breeding hypocrites. An inevitably forced confession is no confession . . . even if God supplies the force.

11.20 OTHER TEXTS THAT SPEAK TO THE ORDER OF SALVATION

In John 16:27, Jesus told the disciples,

“. . . the Father Himself loves you because you have loved me and believed that I came forth from God.”

This statement is a jagged stone in the shoe for the Calvinist, and anyone else who wants to teach that God’s saving love is utterly unconditional. The word “because,” here, is a problem for the committed Calvinist and the committed Universalist . . . neither of whom want any meaningful human condition attached to salvation. Jesus did not say that the disciples loved Him because the Father dragged them to Him. One must really play with the structure of this sentence to make it fit the Calvinistic doctrine. It places a clear condition on God’s love for the disciples. There was something in them that prompted His love for them. On the surface, this may sound like an “earned” salvation, but it isn’t, when we realize the contrite nature of the requirement. The “law of faith” is not the same as the law of works. Rom 3:27

This condition for God’s love is twofold. One, the disciples loved Jesus, and two; they believed that He came from God. *Their faith worked by love.* Gal 5:5-6 Jesus said that this was the reason God loved them. This love goes beyond the genuine good will that God has for every sinner. God bestows this “manner of love” upon believers when He calls them the sons of God. It is adoptive love. 1 John 3:1; Eph 1:5 This does not contradict the verse in 1 John which says “we love Him because He first loved us.” We need not worry about any contradiction between these two texts. What these texts teach is the reciprocal and voluntary nature of love. All love starts with God. He is love. When we love Him, it is because He has put that ability in us. 1 John 4:10,19

There is no problem in John 16:27 for the non-Calvinist who insists that God really loves every sinner and has provided for their salvation. The non-Calvinist knows that there is a sense in which God loves every living soul *unconditionally*. He *desires* their salvation but he does not *decree* it. As we have seen, God loved the Jews but this did not mean that every Jew was saved. Jesus loved the rich young ruler, but we do not know if the man ever received His love. Jesus washed the

feet of Judas but Judas did not respond in faith. The power of love is behind the gospel and it is a saving love. It reflects God's desire that all be saved . . . if they meet the condition.

This text is also a problem for the Calvinist who insists that God chose to love Jacob savingly, *for no reason* in him. (See our previous discussion of Romans 9.) Jesus is giving a reason for God's adoptive and electing love for the disciples. He clearly did not say that the reason is their obedience to the law.

Isaiah 57:15 bears repeating.

For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

This text provides a very poignant instruction. This text would also be one of the reasons that Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand the new birth. The phrase "revive the spirit" sounds much like being born again of the Spirit. We see, here, that there is a clear condition attached to this reviving of the heart. There is a condition for seeing the kingdom and dwelling with God in Heaven. The condition is unique in its nature. It is not something we would be proud of. It is an admission of our unworthiness. **The only thing we bring to the table of salvation is our confessed need of salvation.**

This is a remarkable text indeed, because it suggests that the grace of God is actually conditional. I think theologians would call this an "antinomy." It is an apparent contradiction because we would not naturally think that "unmerited favor" would have a condition that must be met before it is bestowed. This may be something of a mystery, but it is a major theme, which runs through the entire Bible. God does not revive the heart of the proud. Instead, He resists them. Only the contrite have their heart and spirit revived.

Proverbs 3:34 says, "Surely He scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble." Peter said, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time." 1 Peter 5:5-6 James also said, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." "Humble

yourselves in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up.” James 4:6, 10 Jesus said, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Luke 14:11

All of these texts (and others) use a language that is virtually impossible to reconcile with the Calvinistic view of irresistible grace. We are commanded to humble *ourselves*, yet this is not compatible with the notion that we must be irresistibly humbled by an effectual call or regeneration. It makes no sense to say that we must humble ourselves after God has irresistibly humbled us. These texts are telling us that there is a condition, which must be met before God bestows His saving grace. The condition is contrition . . . therefore boasting is excluded. Rom 3:27; 4:16

“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” James 4:8

This simple text is a statement that captures the essence of our hope; yet it runs contrary to the notion that regeneration must precede faith.

11.21 ROMANS 3:27-WHAT IS THE LAW OF FAITH?

The biblical command to draw near to God would be superfluous in the Calvinistic schema. The promise that if we draw near to God then He will draw near to us is nonsense if God must monergistically drag us to Himself . . . first. What is the point of making the promise? God would essentially be saying, “I will draw near to those who I drag near to Myself.” It would be gracious but it doesn’t make much sense.

The beatitudes describe the spirit of saving faith, which works through love. If you have ever wondered what Paul meant when he said that boasting is excluded by the “law of faith”, then you have much of your answer in the humility of the beatitudes, and similar texts. Paul does not say that boasting is excluded by the “gift” of faith. (Although, it is true that boasting would certainly be excluded if faith were an irresistible gift.) We are not justified by obeying the law of commandments. We are justified by obedience to the “law of faith.” The law of faith commands us to walk in the Spirit, or be led of the Spirit. The law of faith works in proportion to the light that each one of us has received. Believers recognize their failure and inability to

obey the law of commandments perfectly, but they desire to keep them anyway. Saving faith recognizes God's absolute lordship over us. We are His creation. Faith desires to be forgiven, and forgive others.

I hope that when you read the beatitudes you see the clear conditions that are attached to "seeing the kingdom," "being comforted," "inheriting the earth," "being filled with righteousness," "obtaining mercy," "seeing God," and "being called the sons of God." I hope you also recognize that you could not perfectly meet these conditions according to the strict letter of the law, but you can choose to strive for the perfection and blessing described in the beatitudes. Mt 5:1-11

If the Calvinists are correct, the beatitudes are reduced to a description of the inevitable results of the new birth. They could not be meaningful conditions of the blessings promised for each faith virtue. Some of the blessings promised in the beatitudes are clearly salvific. Receiving the kingdom, being comforted, obtaining mercy, seeing God, and being called the sons of God are descriptions of eternal life. There is no contradiction here when we understand the spiritual difference between the law of works and the law of faith. Rom 3:27

We saw in Romans 9:31-32 that those of Israel who sought righteousness by the law did not obtain it, but the elect obtained it because they sought it by faith. Again, we see that the righteousness, which we are to "seek first", is that righteousness which comes by faith. **We see how righteousness is actively pursued, yet not in order to earn salvation. It is pursued in the spirit of faith.** This may seem like a hair splitting distinction, but the true test of any action lies in its motive. The devil is often found in the details . . . but so is the Holy Spirit.

12.0 Who Did Jesus Die For?

You may think this question is a biblical “no-brainer”, but not after John Owen or a veteran Calvinist gets a hold of you. This is another place where the Calvinist is caught subordinating that which is clearer in Scripture to that which would be less clear in Scripture. By claiming that Jesus only died for some sinners, the Calvinist necessarily assumes that Jesus *did not die* for the other sinners. **In the Calvinistic system, there are people for whom Jesus did not die, in any saving sense.** Remember, in the Reformed system, there is no plan of salvation for some people. The reprobate are being passed by. The gospel is not intended to save them. They will never have a genuine opportunity to be saved. It would not make sense, to Calvinists, for Jesus to die for any sinner who is not ultimately going to be saved. God would be getting robbed since Jesus would have paid for something that He did not receive. This is not a necessary conclusion but you can see how it might look that way.

12.1 BOTH SIDES LIMIT THE ATONEMENT

Both sides of our debate know that the atonement of Christ is “limited” but they don’t mean it in the same sense. The Bible is quite clear that some people will not savingly benefit from Jesus’ death. This is in spite of the fact that it says, repeatedly, that He died for the whole world, all men, and everyone. There are also numerous texts, which teach that Jesus died specifically for believers (aka: the Church). Both sides of our debate must deal with this dilemma. We will see that the answer will take us back to our earlier question of whether salvation has an independent human condition, or not.

Calvinists limit the atonement in its very *intent*. This is because of their doctrine of unconditional election. (Remember, election is always in the driver’s seat in their system. The other doctrines must go where election takes them.) In their system, Jesus did not die to atone for the reprobate; nor did He die to make salvation possible for them, if they meet the condition of faith. **In their system, even if the reprobate could repent and believe then they still would not be saved because Jesus would not have died to atone for their sins.** Real Calvinists will insist that Jesus accomplished atonement for

the elect and only the elect. The chosen sinners will not be able to resist the effects of the atonement. They must be redeemed because Jesus died for them. Nevertheless, most Calvinists will suggest that the death of Christ would be, somehow, *sufficient* for the atonement of every sinner . . . but not *definite* for every sinner. This would appear to put him in agreement with our non-Calvinist. This is where the explanation can get tricky.

The Reformed confessions are quite consistent at this point of our debate. They teach that the death of Christ was sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world. They teach that Jesus' death is of infinite worth and value. However, they would reject the assertion that Jesus actually died for every sinner. The non-Calvinist will say, "I could not be saved without Jesus' death on the cross". The Calvinist will say, "Christ gained my salvation for me on the cross". The subtle difference can be difficult to understand. But let's try.

It is not always easy to find a Calvinistic quote that succinctly states the negative assertion that Jesus *did not die* for some sinners. (And this should be viewed as a good thing.) We saw earlier that the Westminster Confession, in Chapter 3 Section 6, said:

As God has appointed the elect unto glory, so has he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ; are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season; are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved but the elect only.¹

There is no clear mention of the doctrine of imputation in this statement. That is a little blurry. Nevertheless, it certainly does not alter their bottom line conviction. The elect sinner's faith, which applies his justification, is carefully shown to be *no different* from the other saving graces that are mentioned. In their system, redemption should essentially be viewed like adoption or regeneration. It would be done unilaterally (or monergistically) by God to the elect sinners. The elect sinners would play no independent role in their redemption, *or the application* of their redemption. Calvinists would insist that all of these gifts are necessary for salvation and none could be resisted by the elect.

In spite of their denials, this qualifies them as “Christian” fatalists. Once again, in their system the elect play no truly independent role in their own salvation. Every essential aspect of salvation would be utterly irresistible.

It is noteworthy to point out that the writers of the Confession place “redeemed by Christ” before the phrase “are effectually called unto faith in Christ.” That is not an accident. This is how the process works in their system. The elect sinner’s faith is not really the condition of redemption in their system; instead, their redemption is the reason that the elect will have faith. Calvinists teach that if Jesus died for you . . . then you *will* believe it. You could do no other. If He did not die for you then you will never trust the cross. You aren’t supposed to. If Jesus did not die for you then you will not be given the ability to trust the cross. There obviously is no plan of salvation for you, if Jesus did not die for your sins.

Here is one quote from the September 2005 issue of Ligonier’s Tabletalk magazine. It helps to state the Calvinistic view of the cross. In the daily study for September 9, the writer is explaining the Calvinistic interpretation of 1 John 2:2. In this text, the Apostle is telling believers that Jesus “is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” The Tabletalk writer says the following:

What 1 John 2:2 is telling us is that Jesus is the only Savior of the world; that is, He is the only way anyone can be saved no matter who he is (John 14:6). Jesus died to save a people out of every nation; in that sense, He is the propitiation for the whole world. **Nevertheless, this does not mean that He died for every individual who has ever lived.**²

Here the Tabletalk writer asserts the historical Reformed interpretation of virtually all of the biblical texts, which show Jesus dying to save the world. He sidesteps the *plain sense* of this text regarding the atonement and replaces it with an unnecessary and awkward inference. He replaces it with a subordinate and secondary meaning, which accommodates the presuppositions of his system. He wrenches the text from its context by conjuring up another context. We shouldn’t let him get away with it. It is a good rule of interpretation to make sure the plain sense of a text cannot be reconciled with that

which is clear in Scripture, before we look to a possible secondary interpretation. As you probably know, there is a long list of biblical texts, which speak to a universal application of the cross of Christ. The Calvinist is caught making inferences on top of his inferences, and it gets him into trouble.

Please note, first, that the distinction between the Jewish nation and the Gentile nations is not mentioned in 1 John. Nations are not mentioned in 1 John. Abraham is not mentioned in 1 John. Israel is not mentioned. Circumcision is not mentioned in 1 John. Moses is not mentioned in 1 John. God's covenant with Israel is not mentioned in 1 John. Therefore, when John addresses this New Testament letter to believers, and says that Jesus died for our sins, he is talking about all believers. Therefore, when he says that Jesus also died for the "whole world," he is talking about unbelievers as well. The average reader of this text will forever understand it this way until the Calvinists can convince everyone that John is excluding the reprobate from hope in the cross. This is not the only text in which they have this problem.

12.2 OMISSIONS THAT TEACH

To help prove the error in the Calvinistic view of the atonement we can ask a couple of simple questions. First, we search the Bible to see if it ever explicitly states that Jesus did not die for someone, or some group of people. The following is a list of biblical texts that explicitly teach that Jesus *did not die* for someone's sins.

1.

It's a short list . . . there aren't any such texts. The Bible never plainly says that Jesus *did not die* for someone's sins. If there was such a text in Scripture then you can be sure that all Calvinists would be rallying around it like desperate bees on a lone flower. They would have three books out on that text alone . . . in every generation.

Next, we will list those texts, which explicitly teach that Jesus *only* died for the elect:

1.

This is another empty list. There are no texts, which teach that Jesus *only* died for the Church. To be clear, there are several texts, which teach that Jesus died for the Church. We all agree that He died for the Church. There is no debate over that.

If one person was ever said to be excluded from hoping in the cross of Christ then it would certainly buttress the Calvinistic view. But it is never said in the Bible that Jesus did not die for Cain, Esau, Pharaoh, Jezebel, Judas Iscariot, Herod, or Demas. The Bible never explicitly states that Jesus did not die for unbelievers. The absence of such texts speaks volumes in understanding the *intent* of Christ's death on the cross, and the importance of independent faith as a requirement for justification. The Bible speaks often of God's great patience and His universal love. This love is unconditional on our obedience to the law but it is not irresistible. The Bible teaches that salvation has a condition, which the sinner must meet, and you know what it is.

Simply put, the Calvinistic doctrine of the atonement insists that there are people for whom Jesus *did not die to save*. Calvinists will rarely use such plain language but you should not be surprised by that at this point. Too much plain language is theological suicide for the Reformed views of election. Here again, they have taken that which could possibly be inferred in the Bible (if you are as brilliant as John Owen) and given it preeminence over that which is more clearly taught in the Bible. They hold to an understanding of the cross that is contrary to multiple references of the cross in Scripture. Here, again, we see how the Reformed system is built upon *inferences*.

The Calvinistic view of the scope and intent of the atonement is left hanging by the complete omission of any texts that would explicitly support it. As we just saw in 1 John 2:2, the Bible teaches that Jesus is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world; that is believers and unbelievers. That which is not in the Bible can be very revealing. This is especially true when you combine these omissions with the presence of so many texts, which teach that Jesus died for the world, in the context of salvation.

(It is generally agreed that the death of Christ serves as a great example of self-sacrifice for every person who ever hears about it. But this knowledge does not, in and of itself, secure the saving effects of the atonement.)

Those who have had to defend the practice of infant baptism know very well the importance of what is *not said* in the Bible, or in the record of Church history. There are no explicit prohibitions regarding the baptism of infants in the Bible. There is no text that says, “My people shall not baptize their babies,” or “Go ye into the world and only baptize adult disciples, who profess faith.” These omissions are sometimes called “screaming silences.” Now baptism is a topic for another day but it does make an important point. Sometimes omissions in Scripture speak volumes.

This is very true in advertising, where half-truths are often presented as whole truths. If the sales people told you everything about their product, then they know you might not buy it. So they tell you only the benefits and omit the downside. They don’t tell us that the used car was in a bad wreck or under water. They don’t tell us about the need to replace the propane tank every 20 days. They fail to tell us about the nasty odor, or the fact that the thing won’t work at night, or in thunderstorms, etc. If Calvinists told us, in plain terms, what they really believe then they would be quickly rejected, by the majority of Bible believers. I will grant that an argument from silence has limited value, but this does show that another major tenet of the Reformed view has no explicit biblical proof text.

These notable omissions in the Bible combined with the number of texts which teach that Jesus came to reconcile *the world* to God, make it very difficult to accept the Calvinistic version of “limited atonement.” (Or “definite atonement” or “particular redemption” or “particular atonement” or “definite redemption” or “effectual atonement”, they all mean the same thing. Some just sound better.) We will look at some of the texts in question, shortly. **We will see that if Jesus did not die, in some salvific sense, for every sinner who has ever lived, then the Bible was written carelessly.**

The most influential Calvinists teach that Jesus did not die for every sinner, without plainly saying it any more than is absolutely necessary. **Calvinists assume that if Jesus had died for every sinner then every sinner would be saved. This exposes their emasculation of faith as a meaningful condition of salvation.** They do not want any independent human condition attached to salvation, even if it is humiliating and dependant upon the common grace of God. In their view, salvation must come by irresistible grace in order to be all of grace.

This causes Calvinists to marginalize their own professed doctrine of justification by faith . . . alone. They are caught over simplifying the truth and that is quite an irony. Most Calvinistic teachers are not simple-minded people.

12.3 KEY TEXTS ON THE DEATH OF CHRIST

One might think that a cursory reading of the New Testament would be sufficient to prove that Jesus died to reconcile every single sinner to God. We are not told to go into the world and tell all men everywhere that Jesus *might* have died for their sins. He did die for them, but it remains to be seen if the effects of His death will be imputed to their account, through faith. This is how the Bible reads. The whole body of Scripture teaches that God *desires* every person to be saved, but He refuses to *decree* it. **The handful of texts, which could be taken to infer that God desires someone to perish, cannot hold up to the unmistakable teaching of God's desire for everyone to be saved.** As we saw in the Super Bowl illustration, God has predestined that some people will not be saved. They are “appointed” to wrath, but it is not because they weren’t chosen to be believers. Those who refuse to repent will not be saved by the death of Christ.

If this issue boils down to a battle of *inferences* then the non-Calvinists win. The Bible infers that Jesus died for every person much more than it infers that He did not die for every person. Just as we saw in the alleged imputation of Adam’s guilt to every descendant, and their order of salvation, the Scriptures are the biggest obstacle to the Calvinistic conclusions on the atonement. When we take the following texts and set them against the utter omission of texts that exclude anyone from hoping in Christ, they make a strong case for the universal and salvific intent of Jesus’ death on the cross.

The veteran Calvinist will explain each of the upcoming texts while defending his version of limited atonement. As seen in the previous Tabletalk quote, the Calvinist will insist that the following texts merely mean that Jesus died for all *kinds* of people, or all nations of people. When I was a Calvinist, I thought the same thing. But there is one simple point which I would hope all Calvinists could admit, and it is this: It sure looks like Jesus went to the cross with the intended purpose of paying the ransom for every single sinner that has ever

lived. When we interpret Scripture in light of Scripture . . . the body of evidence is very convincing. The Calvinistic position on the atonement would have to be found *below the surface* of multiple texts.

This is not a point on which we have scant biblical revelation. The life and death of Christ is the very theme and focal point of the entire Bible. This is why books like John Owen's The Death of Death are pretty big and difficult to read.³ The defense of the Calvinistic view of the atonement is a big job. This is because there are so many texts, which state (and infer) that Jesus died for everyone. If God wanted to convey the Calvinistic view of the atonement, He could have done it with unquestionable clarity.

God *could* have said, "Jesus came to taste death for the elect alone." Or Scripture might say, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one, to his own way, and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of *some*." Likewise, Jesus could have said, "God sent the Son into the world so that the church alone might be saved." Paul could have said that whoever believes was chosen to be a believer; or that God desires *all kinds* of men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. John the Baptist could have said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the chosen." This language would be clearer but it is not the language of the Bible.

If you are new to the debate, please read the following scripture references slowly and carefully. Ask yourself these questions: Are these texts implicit or explicit? As a whole, are they implicit or explicit?

John the Baptist said Jesus was the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." John 1:29

The writer of Hebrews said Jesus came so "that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone." Heb 2:9

The Apostle John told *believers*, who were not identified as Jewish, that Jesus was "the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" 1 John 2:2

The Apostle Paul said that God, through Jesus "has reconciled us" and is "reconciling the world to Himself" 2 Cor 5:18-19

Paul also said that God would “reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.” He then goes on to say that, God had reconciled his Colossian readers if they continued in the faith. Col 1:20-23

Jesus said that He gave His body as the Living Bread “for the life of the world.” John 6:51

Jesus said, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth will draw all [people/men] to Myself.” John 12:32 (We have already seen that this is the same word for “draw” used in John 6, which sometimes means to “drag.”)

Jesus said God “so loved the world . . .” (you know the rest). John 3:16

Jesus also said that God sent Him so that “the world through Him might/would be saved.” John 3:17

Paul also said, God “desires all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.” He said that Jesus “gave Himself a ransom for all.” 1 Tim 2:4-6

Paul told Titus that “the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men teaching us that we should deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world . . .” Titus 2:11

The Apostle Peter tells us that false teachers deny “the Lord/Master who bought them.” 2 Pet 2:1

The prophet Isaiah said, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” Isa 53:6

Paul said, “In Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.” 1 Cor 15:22

We'll stop there. We really don't need to take the time to break down each of these texts in their specific contexts. Together, these texts will forever be interpreted, by the majority of Bible readers, to simply mean that Jesus died for everyone. It is hard to miss the main point of the cross of Christ. When we deliver Bibles to people who have never heard the gospel, they do not naturally interpret these texts in the Calvinistic way.

It seems that the Holy Spirit, Who inspired the biblical writers, is much less concerned about misrepresenting the intent of the cross than the Calvinist is. Calvinists rarely use this kind of universal language when describing the atonement in their own words. They are afraid we might actually think that God really wants everyone, who was stuck with a sinful nature from birth, to be delivered from it. (Wouldn't that be just awful?) They seem to think that God would not be sovereign if He desired every sinner to be saved, and yet every sinner was not saved. They assume that God would not really be God if He does not save by irresistible compulsion. For many Calvinists, it seems that a sovereign God *could not* delegate authority, or the power of contrary choice, in the context of salvation. Apparently, God could not bestow the ability to repent, and still be considered as sovereign. (This is the underlying assumption of James White's book The Potter's Freedom).⁴

In these texts, we can begin to see why God decided to let everyone be born in sin in the first place. He had a plan, and the plan would enable Him to showcase His great holiness and love. I don't think He could have demonstrated His glorious character, as thoroughly, if He had not ordained the entrance of sin. Everyone should know how great God is . . . and how gracious He is.

We need to be fair in our listing of Scriptures on the atonement. Here is a partial list of those texts, which Calvinists typically insist are teaching that Jesus *only* died to save those who were unconditionally chosen to be believers before the foundation of the world. Try to decide for yourself. Do they *explicitly* teach that Jesus did not die for every person who ever lived?

The angel told Joseph, ". . . you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. Mt 1:21

Paul said, “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners . . .” 1 Tim 1:15

Jesus also said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many.” Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45

Acts 20:28 says that leaders should shepherd the Church of God “which He purchased with His own blood.”

Jesus was sent to “redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.” Gal 4:5

Jesus was “lifted up” that whoever believes in Him should have eternal life. John 3:14-15

Jesus “gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.” Titus 2:14

Note: There are many places in Scripture where the biblical writers use the terms “us” or “we” to describe those for whom Jesus came to save. It should be agreed that the majority of these texts are referring to believers. Obviously, the Calvinist will argue that all of them are referring to believers . . . only. This is why we quoted, John MacArthur’s comments about *who* the Bible was written for, at the very beginning of our study. Calvinists insist that every time a text says “us” (or “we”) in the context of the cross, then the writer always means “only the elect.” This is supposed to show that Jesus did not intend to die for every sinner in the world. He would have died only for the church.

One text that is problematic for the Calvinist is in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Paul told the churches of Galatia, who he had doubts about, that our Lord Jesus Christ “gave Himself for our sins that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father . . .” Gal 1:4; 4:20 Here, Paul is speaking as a member of the human race when he says that Jesus gave Himself for us. **It is clear in the letter that Paul is not entirely sure whether every person in those churches was elect, but he is sure that Jesus died for them.** Again, this would be very careless of the Apostle to make

the inference that Jesus died for every sinner if, indeed, He did not die for every sinner.

One easy point, in all of this, is made by noting that if Jesus died for the church of all true believers then it does not necessarily eliminate the possibility that he died for every sinner. This is especially true if there is a meaningful condition that must be met in order to benefit permanently from Christ's death on the cross. There can be more than one way to interpret many of these texts, and this can be the difficulty in understanding who Jesus died for, and in what sense.

As another example, we could take the words of the angel to Joseph in Mt 1:21. "... He will save His people from their sins." Standing alone, these words could mean that Jesus was only coming to save predetermined individual sinners from their sins. The Jews could have supposed that Jesus would only save them since they had been called "God's people" up to that time. (It is generally agreed that Matthew wrote his gospel account with an eye to the Jewish reader.) Others might understand this to mean that Jesus was only coming to save predetermined Jew and Gentile sinners; He was not coming to save the Jewish and Gentile sinners who were not chosen to be believers. Everyone agrees that the elect church of true believers is called "God's people."

There is another possible understanding of this angelic statement. There is a sense in which every sinner in the human race would be included in the term "His people." We are all created by God and we are "His people" in that sense. In Him we each live, move, and have our being. We are all God's people, in this sense, whether we acknowledge it or not. Everyone belongs to God. Paul acknowledged that we are all God's offspring. Acts 17:28 Therefore, it is possible that Jesus was coming to save every sinner. This is a viable interpretation of Matthew 1:21, especially if there is a meaningful condition that must be met before an adult will actually be saved by Jesus' death. This explains why some sinners won't go to heaven in spite of God's love for them.

Calvinists will have us walk an imaginary tightrope in understanding the effect of the death of Christ. In one place, they infer that the death of Christ, by itself, actually secures the salvation of the elect. They make no mention of the faith through which the effects of the cross are imputed. Then, at another place, they will stress the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and insist that we must believe the gospel in order to be saved by the death of Christ.

12.4 THE WORDS “WORLD,” “ALL,” “ALL MEN,” AND “EVERYONE”

As has been already said, sometimes words have multiple meanings, or a range of meaning. Sometimes in Scripture, these universal words are used in the context of a certain “kind” of person. They are limited to every person in a sub category. For example, when the Pharisees complained that the “world” had gone after Jesus, they were using hyperbole. [John 12:19](#) Every sinner on the planet obviously had not become a Christian. It *seemed* to them that everyone was becoming a disciple of Christ, and they were threatened by it. We see the same kind of thing today. When the atheists or homosexuals get a lot of media attention it can seem like they are taking over the world. The fact of the matter is . . . they are not.

In light of the above lists of texts, you may find it hard to believe that we are even asking the question, “Who did Jesus die for?” But Calvinists expect us to believe that the words “world,” “all,” and “all men” do not mean what they ordinarily mean . . . in each and every one of the texts. Thus, it is fair to place the burden of proof on the Calvinists if they want us to interpret each of these universal terms as “all kinds of men”, “all nations”, and “all of the elect”. We don’t need to look for a secondary meaning when the texts already make sense, and they do not contradict any other texts of Scripture.

In the previous Tabletalk quote on 1 John 2:2 we have seen, in a nutshell, how Calvinists limit the intent of all these texts. They will insist that these verses are simply saying that the words “world,” “all,” and “all men” in each of these texts, merely means that Jesus died for *all kinds* of sinners, or *all nations*. They insist that Jesus died for “all” of the elect. They labor the obvious. It is certainly true that Jesus died for both Jew and Gentile, but this does not logically eliminate the possibility that Jesus died for every single sinner. Calvinistic teachers still have to find proof texts, which show that there are individuals for whom Jesus did not die. That is, if they want to make their case with certainty. If they fail to produce such texts then they should expect to remain in the minority as long as the Bible is read more than Calvinistic books and creeds.

It is important, at this point, to acknowledge that the vast majority of people who have read the entire Bible have not been Jewish. When

I first began to read the gospels, I never once wondered if Jesus might have only come to save the people of Israel. It never crossed my mind. I barely knew there was a distinction. I certainly had not assumed that the Jews were the only ethnic group on earth that needed a Savior. I never assumed that if God would come and fix our mess that He would only be coming to help a certain nation or group of nations. I may have been a red-blooded American kid, who had been influenced by years of American exceptionalism, but I thought Americans needed to be saved from sin just like everyone else.

It is true that there are places in Scripture where it is helpful, and sometimes necessary, to have an understanding of the Jewish mindset, literary styles, and state of affairs to properly understand the teaching. I also realize that one must have an adequate knowledge of Jewish and world history to understand some parts of Scripture . . . *but not these texts*. I am not Jewish nor was I brought up in the Church, but I understood these texts the first time I read them. They are not complicated or cloaked with mystery. Jesus died for our sins . . . I got it. I have no doubt that many who read the early manuscripts of the New Testament were Jewish, but the majority of people who have read the entire Bible are not Jewish. It is quite reasonable to believe that God knew this would be the case when He inspired the biblical writers. Do we need to be Jewish, or think like the Hebrews of old, to get the plain meaning of these texts on the sacrifice of Jesus? I don't think so. We don't need to be steeped in the Old Testament to understand the essential meaning of these texts on the cross. Indeed, a greater knowledge of the Old Testament enhances our understanding, but it is not necessary to get the basic meaning.

The point here is this: It is not the plain sense of these texts to assume that the terms "world," "whole world," "all," and "every one" should be understood as merely all kinds of people . . . in every single instance. It cannot be proven that every Jew would have thought that every Gentile should go to hell, although some evidently did. (And vice versa.) It certainly is not the plain sense of the terms "everyone" or "every man" to mean all tribes or nations. The predominant meaning of these terms, in the English language, is of *individuals*. Redemption is not imputed to tribes and nations; it is imputed to individual sinners. This gracious (and universal) redemption is imputed to those who confess that they deserve to perish but would rather have eternal life. We will

see shortly that the plain sense of the term “world” could not possibly mean “the church” or the “elect,” as some have feebly suggested.

In his conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus was not asking if Gentiles were included in the hope of salvation. There was no discussion of the Jew/Gentile distinction in their conversation, recorded in John 3. Can we be absolutely certain that Nicodemus, who was one of the few Jewish leaders who took Jesus seriously, thought that God would not want to forgive Gentiles? Would Nicodemus assume that Jews were the only people who would reject the Light because they loved darkness more? The discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus was of “earthly” and “heavenly” things . . . not Jew and Gentile things.

If we look at the contexts of the other Scriptures listed above, then we find the same thing. There is nothing in Scripture, which suggests that the final judgment will be based on our nationality.

Therefore, one question for the Calvinistic interpreter is, “Who would have thought that God’s only begotten Son, Who is the only ultimate Mediator between God and men, would *only* come to save Jews? Of the billions of people who will eventually read the Bible, how many would think that only Jews needed to be saved from sin? Likewise, who would have thought that only Gentiles needed to be saved? In fact, it appears that many Jews did not even think they needed a Savior to take away their sins. The Jews were looking for a conquering king, like David. They weren’t looking for a “Suffering Servant” who would wash feet and then die as a Scapegoat. Jesus, and the Apostles, labored to convince the Jews that they needed a Savior. Remember, that was Paul’s point in Romans 9-11.

Thus, the Calvinist who defends his version of “limited atonement” offers an exhausting explanation of the obvious. He expects us to be surprised that the Son of God came to save sinners from all over the world but it is not much of a surprise. It is surprising that God would sacrifice His Son to save us. He didn’t have to do that, but it is not surprising that He would condescend to save every sinner. They are each His offspring and God is love, as well as a consuming fire.

A second objection to the Calvinistic interpretation of these texts is their use of the word “world” in these salvific contexts. Why would Jesus, and the biblical writers, use such careless language if Jesus did not die on the cross for every sinner’s sin? Why not clearly state that Jesus only came to die for some people? As we saw in Chapter 6 of this

writing, the Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation teaches that salvation is not available to all sinners. It never has been. **So we must ask, why all the biblical pretense of a universal hope, which would be available to every sinner, if it is not available to every sinner? Why does the Bible give the clear impression that our salvation actually hinges on our faith, if our salvation actually hinges on God's choice of whom Jesus would die for?** (As a Calvinist, I could never adequately answer that question.) Again, every Calvinist's mantra should be "The just shall live by unconditional election."

It is no wonder that it takes someone as smart as John Owen to explain that Jesus did not die for every sinner. It is also no wonder that it took him around 160,000 words to do it. There is a lot of Scripture which would need to be surgically dissected to find its "real" meaning. Again, this is not necessary when the texts already make sense on the surface. Owen and the Calvinists will not allow us to take these texts at face value even when they do not contradict any other clear teaching of Scripture. Nor do they defy evident reason. They only contradict the erroneous Calvinistic assumptions, which we have already exposed. The Calvinist forces these texts to say less than they actually say, in order to fit his purely unconditional view of salvation.

Occasionally you will hear a Calvinistic teacher suggest that the word "world" should actually be understood to be the church, or the elect. They would like us to understand John 3:16 to be saying, "God so loved the *church* that He gave His only begotten Son . . ." That may be true but it is not what Jesus said. Jesus could have said that but He didn't. He chose to say that God loves the *world*. It seems that He was not concerned about anyone misunderstanding His meaning. It hardly merits mentioning, but I read one Calvinistic writer who suggested that Jesus loved (and died for) "a" world . . . as in the world of the chosen. I won't embarrass him by quoting the source. We don't let the Jehovah Witnesses get away with that in John 1:1 and we must not let Calvinists do it in John 3:16. The Word was not "a" god and Jesus did not die for "a" world. He died for "the" world so that no one who believes shall perish. It's not that complicated.

A good Bible teacher (Calvinist or not) would never dream of substituting the words "elect," "Church," or "believers" for the word "world" anywhere else in Scripture. They simply don't mean the same thing. If there were two words in the Bible that do not mean the same

thing, they would be the words “world” and the word “elect.” Those terms should never be confused. Often the word “world” is used to mean the exact opposite of the true church. 1 John 2:15; Rom 12:2 On many occasions, the word “world” is used to describe everyone who is not part of the invisible church of sincere believers. Many times the word “world” means everyone. Saved or lost. Jew or Gentile.

Jesus used the word “world” to describe the “field” which contains both wheat and tares. Mt 13:38 Remember, any unbeliever was part of the world before they became a believer. This is the sense in which God loves the world in John 3:16. God loves the “world” of unbelievers in the sense that He pities them and desires them to be reconciled to Him . . . if they meet the divinely appointed condition. God does not love in word only but He demonstrates His love by His actions. God’s Son laid down His life for the whole world. This is the way John 3:16 reads for virtually every person that has ever read it before being exposed to the Calvinistic theory.

Only when exposed to the Calvinistic interpretation would anyone think that God does not love the unbelieving world and make a good faith offer of salvation to every sinner. I have noticed in the writings and sermons of Calvinists that they often use the word “world” in the same way as everyone else. They understand it to mean everyone in the human race, including unbelievers. Sometimes we have to wonder why Calvinists are so reluctant to think that God would love other unbelievers when He loved them when they were unbelievers.

You might think this would be the end of Calvinism (and it is for many). But you should know this about Calvinistic theologians: they don’t read the Bible in a cursory manner and that is a good thing.

12.5 WHAT IS PROPITIATION?

So, one point is clear and agreed upon by both sides of our debate. The death of Christ was not just for Jews and it was not just for Gentiles. It was accomplished for all kinds of people. This much is easy and is the essence of the Calvinistic explanation for all of the texts of Scripture that teach a universal intention for the cross. The monumental task for Calvinists is proving, from Scripture, that it is impossible for Jesus to have died for every individual. In light of all of the texts we have listed, that is a tough job.

Let's return to 1 John 2:2. "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." Remember, this is the text, which the Tabletalk writer was explaining when he said,

... Nevertheless, this does not mean that He died for every individual who has ever lived.⁵

I think there is some exegetical sleight of hand going on here and we need to expose it. First, the text does not say that Jesus is merely the Savior of the world (like many other texts in Scripture). John is not merely saying that someone from every nation and tribe will be saved. He is saying that Jesus is the propitiation for the sins of the "whole world". Yet nations aren't propitiated. Individual sinners are. The distinction between nations and tribes is obliterated in Christ. There are no ethnic differences in God's kingdom. Col 3:11 God might bring earthly destruction on a nation, like Sodom, but that does not necessarily mean every citizen of Sodom went to hell. If the Calvinistic assumption that someone from every tribe will be saved, is true, then somebody from Sodom (and Edom) will be in heaven by virtue of the death of Christ.

To "propitiate" means to satisfy God's demands, or appease His just wrath. It restores us to favor with God. Jesus did this by His death. (Everyone is born in sin, thanks to Adam, but everyone is born in a state of grace, thanks to Jesus.) John says Jesus is the propitiation for our sins. Jesus appeases God's anger on individuals. There is nothing *national* in the context of this verse. 1 John 2:2 Again, there is no Jew/Gentile discussion in the whole letter of 1 John. This verse, and the whole letter, is about distinguishing believers from unbelievers. It is not about distinguishing Jewish believers from non-Jewish believers.

The plain sense of this text is to show that Jesus is propitiation for the sins of unbelievers as well as believers. That being said, John is not teaching Universalism because unbelievers will not have the propitiation *imputed* to their account. The propitiation is fully accomplished by Christ and then sovereignly applied, according to God's promise, through our faith. The just shall live by their faith. Therefore, believers will not have their sin imputed to their own account. Unbelievers will. This is why 1 John is such an important epistle. John says that his purpose in writing

was so that believers may know that their faith is sincere; thus ensuring that Christ's propitiation will be applied to them. They would be born of God. This interpretation makes the most sense in light of the entire biblical teaching on salvation.

1John is clearly written to believers. 1 John 5:13 Therefore when John says that Jesus is the propitiation for *our* sins, he means the sins of believers; and when he says that Jesus is the propitiation "not for ours only" he logically means unbelievers. It is common practice among biblical writers to interchange the terms "world" and "unbelievers." The propitiation has been made to appease God's wrath for every sinner ever born. John is not saying that Christ's atonement is imputed permanently and irresistibly to unbelievers. He is teaching that the atonement has been entirely *accomplished*, but it is only permanently *applied* to believers. Faith is a true condition of election; it is not merely the result of election. I hope you can see the difference.

The letter of 1John is not a breakdown of the doctrines of salvation so much as it reveals how we can be sure if we are truly believers. If we are true believers then we may reckon ourselves to be born of God. Scripture teaches that it is possible to have a false or vain faith. 1 Cor 15:2; Gal 2:4; 2 Cor 11:26 John's letter is distinguishing between sincere faith and the faith of a hypocrite. John is assuring us that there is no one, born in sin, for whom Christ did not propitiate God's wrath. The question is whether the propitiation will be permanent.

No struggling sinners, who may be "trembling over their actual sins", should think they could be excluded from hope in Christ. They can be saved from the guilt of their own sins if they humbly confess them. 1 John 2:2 reaffirms that God desires every sinner to be saved but He sovereignly refuses to impose His desire upon adults, who willfully reject the truth.

Once again, we see that this is a very parental disposition. Parents desire their children to be obedient and grateful, but they know that it is impossible to force them to be so. Likewise, God wants His wayward "offspring" to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before Him, but He obviously does not drag us into compliance. Mic 6:8 Even Christians fail to meet that lofty standard perfectly. The Prodigal's father waited for the son to repent. His love was tugging at the son's heart while he was partying in the far country, but it was not an irresistible influence. I am not sure if God actually *could* irresistibly compel us into true

humility. God certainly has the power to make us do the right thing, but again, I question whether He can irresistibly compel us to *want* to do the right thing. It seems that this would contradict the very nature and definition of the will. An irresistibly compelled “choice” is not really a choice. It would render “choice” perfunctory. Again, when Calvinists talk about the “choice” to believe the gospel, they do not mean the power of contrary choice.

The question John is helping us with is this: “Will the propitiation of Christ’s sacrifice be eternally imputed to my life?” Or, “Will I be forgiven?” It is the same as asking: “Am I born of God?” We understand that Jesus died to take away the sin of the world. It is reasonable to think that God could sovereignly apply the propitiation to every infant and child, but adults must have it applied through their faith. The Calvinist essentially ignores the doctrine of imputation when he says that Jesus did not die “for every individual who has ever lived.” We will see shortly how the Calvinistic use of the term “definite atonement” renders the doctrine of imputation *unnecessary*.

Once again, we come back to the question of whether salvation, in its entirety, is really conditional or unconditional. We come back to the definition of the terms voluntary, free will, and independent. There is an independent human condition for salvation. It is penitent faith. It is enabled by the common grace of God . . . not the irresistible grace of God. The LORD expects us to repent and call upon His name. He does not expect us to live perfectly in order to be saved. Let’s stop and give thanks for that.

I saw the cross of Jesus, when burdened with my sin
I sought the cross of Jesus, to give me peace within;
I brought my soul to Jesus, He cleansed it in His blood;
And in the cross of Jesus, I found my peace with God.⁶

12.6 THE SAVIOR OF ALL MEN . . . ESPECIALLY BELIEVERS

Both sides of our debate over predestination would agree that Jesus died for “whoever believes” and this is why it can be difficult to distinguish between the two sides. The cross was not intended to save stubborn unbelievers, unless (and until) they humble themselves and

believe the truth. Hell will be occupied. It is the will of God. However, we should never assume that Jesus did not die for unbelievers. This is not merely a war of words or semantics. Our non-Calvinist categorically rejects the Calvinistic view of inevitable reprobation.

I hope you can see how that precision with words, in this aspect of the debate, is vital. It is very evident at this point, that words (and sentences) can have two different meanings. Unless you are a Universalist, you believe that God *limits* the saving effect of Christ's sacrifice. Jesus may have died for every sinner but that does not guarantee that the effect of the cross is permanently imputed (or applied) to every sinner. This imputation is contingent upon faith in adults. Their faith must be like the faith of a child.

Historically, "Limited Atonement" has been given a lot of attention, and is often seen to favor the non-Calvinist. However, it should be admitted that non-Calvinists often struggle to explain how Christ's atonement could have actually paid the sin debt of those people who end up in hell. They fail to see that our sin debt must be paid by Christ *and then permanently imputed* for salvation to be everlasting. If someone's sin debt was actually paid and imputed by Christ's sacrifice, alone, then they would not need to repent and believe. They certainly would not need to be punished.

Here is a text that, I think, effectively summarizes the issue. Paul told Timothy:

For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially to those who believe. 1 Tim 4:10

Here we have another biblical statement, which strongly suggests that Jesus died for unbelievers. "All men" is contrasted to those who believe; yet God is said to be everyone's Savior. This supports the teaching that Christ's atonement was actually made for every person but it is not imputed to unbelievers. Again, the Calvinistic explanation of "all kinds of men" in this verse is really hard to buy into. The context of this statement is not the distinction between Jew and Gentile. The context of Paul's letter is not Jew and Gentile. By the time Paul would have written this letter to Timothy, the church was already established. The fact that Gentiles were included among the elect was well known

in Ephesus, and the other churches where Timothy may have served. Timothy served in predominantly Gentile congregations in Gentile countries. Their big struggle was not ethnic prejudice between Jews and Gentiles. Their struggle was pagan worship, at first, and then keeping their first love. Acts 19:27; Rev 2:4

Jesus died so that every sinner in the world *might* be saved, and every penitent believer *will definitely* be saved. The Bible reads this way. His death is actually sufficient for all (and effective for every child) but the permanent effects are only imputed to those who have genuine faith. And genuine faith is permanent faith. Again, none of this is very difficult if you understand that biblical salvation has a truly independent human condition. The condition must be met by utilizing the common grace of God. The cross, by itself, does not save adults. It wasn't intended to. Faith, by itself, does not save. It wasn't intended to. The cross saves . . . when it is received by faith. Synergistically. A completely monergistic system of salvation, in which the sinner plays no independent role is not biblical; it would be a fatalistic system of salvation. Heb 4:2; Luke 8:15;1 Thes 2:13

The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. Rom 1:16 Therefore, it is not the power of God unto salvation to those who refuse to believe. As we saw in Chapter 10, this is illustrated by Peter's brief walk on the water. Salvation comes by God's power working through our faith. No faith . . . then no power. No faith . . . no forgiveness. Jesus is able to save, to the uttermost, those who come to God through Him. Heb 7:25 It is the way God wants it to be, for everyone. Again, we sing:

Come ye sinners, poor and needy, weak and wounded sick and sore.
Jesus ready stands to save you, full of pity love and pow'r.

Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness He requireth is to feel your need of Him.

I will arise and go to Jesus, He will embrace me in His arms.
In the arms of my dear Savior, O there are ten thousand charms.⁷

12.7 DO YOU PREFER A WELFARE CHECK OR A PAYCHECK?

Hopefully, you remember in Romans 5, we saw that Paul did not teach that Adam's guilt was imputed to every person. It is a critical error of the Calvinistic system. The word for "impute" is not used in Romans 5. We have come now to a context where the Bible actually uses the word "impute." In Romans 3 and 4, Paul teaches the doctrine of justification by faith. He uses the word "impute", repeatedly, in Chapter 4. It means, "to apply to our account", "to credit unto", or "to reckon unto." In the spiritual realm, Jesus voluntarily takes our penalty, as if he committed our sins, and then gives believers His perfect righteousness. Paul illustrates the point using Abraham. He teaches that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness. [Rom 4:3](#)

A contemporary illustration of the Calvinistic view of the atonement might be helpful. Let's suppose you knew a college student with a ton of school debt. Let's also suppose that his rich uncle paid off all of his college loans. The uncle took money from his massive resources and paid the school debt. The lender would be satisfied. The uncle acted as if the debt was his, even though it was not. He substituted his money. This would all be very gracious but it does not fully describe the biblical view of salvation. It does describe the Calvinistic view of salvation.

It is certainly important to understand who actually paid the debt. It was the uncle. The student had no money to pay the debt. However, as you may have noticed in this illustration, the student played no role in the *imputation* of the payment. His uncle simply paid his debt. End of story. The student did not have to go pick up the money, and/or deliver it to the lender. The student did not have to meet any condition for the debt to be completely cancelled. He did not even ask for his uncle's help. The financial aid was not contingent upon the student requesting the aid. In fact, in that scenario, the student could have rigorously objected to the uncle's gracious intervention and it would not have changed a thing. The debt would still have been paid. This would be "irresistible grace." The uncle acted independently and sovereignly to pay off the school loans. This was very gracious of him, but this is where the illustration departs from the biblical teaching on

salvation. Biblical salvation has a condition attached. The sinner must meet the condition of asking for help or there is no salvation.

If the rich uncle required the student to ask for help, and refused any attempts by the student to repay him, then it would resemble the biblical teaching on the atonement. The uncle would have earned and secured the necessary payment, but the money would not be credited to the student's account until it was humbly requested. The rich uncle would have made a generous donation to the University, but it would not be applied to the student's personal account. Although this is not a perfect illustration, it captures the spirit of biblical imputation and the law of faith. Rom 3:27

We must get it drilled between our ears, and settled in our hearts, that there is a real and meaningful condition for our justification as adults. You know what it is: The just shall live by their faith. Abraham believed God and it was counted [imputed] to him for righteousness. Gen 15:6 Paul does not say that Abraham was counted righteous and therefore he could believe God. Rom 4:3 The imputation of righteousness is contingent upon our faith. He who asks for mercy will receive it. Mt 7:7-8 He who does not ask . . . does not receive. Asking for mercy should never be confused with actually paying any portion of the debt. Likewise, asking for help should never be confused with being justified by keeping the law "of works." They are not the same things. If you are proud of your faith then you have the wrong kind.

In Scripture, salvation is often explained by using financial terminology. Jesus provides the necessary "funding" that is sufficient to redeem every sinner ever born. BUT if the individual sinner does not repent and believe the truth then the "funds" will not be applied to our individual account. The "money" is in the bank, but it is not eternally transferred to the account of the unbeliever. Thus, unbelievers remain in debt. They will remain in "debtor's prison." They are bound by sin's penalty and power. Bound by sin does not mean they are unable to repent. A prisoner may be behind bars but it does not mean that he could not regret his crime or desire to be free from its penalty. Those who refuse to repent remain bound to the guilt and condemnation of their own sin. The guilt enslaves them. It actually kills them. When our sin is imputed to our own account, we are dead in sin. Gen 2:17; Eph 2:1; Col 2:13

Also, in our illustration, the rich uncle did not require the student to actually pay any portion of the debt, nor did he ask to be repaid for his help. It was a gift of grace. If he had expected the student to pay back *any portion* of the money then his assistance would not have been “all of grace.” That portion of the financial aid would be a loan with terms and conditions for repayment. It would have been part business deal and part gift. This does not mirror the biblical doctrines of salvation by grace. This would be the same as if God required sinners to keep some portion of the law in order to pay off some of their sin debt. This would not be the gospel . . . it would be legalism, in a salvific sense.

In his encounter with Jesus, the rich young ruler wanted eternal life to come like a business deal, but he overestimated his ability to pay. Instead, the Bible teaches that salvation works like a handout to those who beg for help. Our penitent faith does not actually pay the debt. The blood of the Lamb pays the debt. The biblical salvation is like a welfare check, which must be humbly received. It is not a paycheck, which has been earned, in any sense. If we want a paycheck from God, based on what we deserve, then we will receive it in hell.

This is a great paradox within the gospel. Salvation is undeserved, but it has a crucial condition, which must be met via the common grace of God.

God is not obliged to pay our sin debt. He is not obliged to forgive us . . . unless He promises to forgive us when we repent. We praise His Name. He has made that promise to every single sinner who has ever lived . . . whether they know it or not.

12.8 IMPUTATION IS THE KEY THAT UNLOCKS THE DILEMMA

This imputation which we have been discussing is both an Old Testament teaching and a New Testament teaching. The imputation of righteousness by faith was in effect long before Jesus came. It was working before the laws of Moses were introduced. Adam’s son, Abel, is remembered for his faith. Noah is remembered for his faith. Likewise, righteousness was imputed by faith to Abraham *before* he was set apart to establish the Jewish nation. Gen 4:4;15:6; Rom 4:9-10; Heb 11:4 As we have seen, the law written on every heart is sufficient

to indict every adult as a guilty sinner. The law exposes our need of forgiveness and points us to Christ. Imputation is God's way of wiping out our criminal record. Our trespasses are expunged. It was as if God took our criminal file and ran it through the shredder . . . by nailing it to the cross. Col 2:14

In Psalm 32:2, David said:

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.
Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in
whose spirit there is no deceit.

Any believer can give this text a hearty “amen.” We might naturally think that blessedness is only available for those who *keep* the law, and God certainly does promise blessing to those who keep His commandments. Psalm 1 (I hope you would agree that this text is not saying that *breaking the law* is blessed by God.) Yet, this text teaches that sinners, who have broken the law, can still enjoy God’s blessing. We all should have a great deal of interest in knowing how we can avoid having our sin imputed to our eternal account.

This, by the way, is the text that Jesus was likely referring to when He called Nathanael an Israelite “in whom is no deceit.” John 1:47 This is another place where we may infer that a person was already a believer in the real God before being introduced to Jesus. As we might expect from someone who already knew the Father, Nathanael was quick to recognize the Son. Jesus told the Jews who did not believe in Him, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded forth and came from God . . .” John 8:42 Nathanael already belonged to the Father before he was drawn to the Son. Nathanael had heard and learned from the Father. John 17:6; John 6:44

The same was true of Cornelius, who was a Gentile. He was a devout man who feared God *before* hearing about Jesus from the Apostle Peter. Even if these men had never heard about Jesus, their transgressions would have been forgiven. They believed God, and it would be imputed to them as righteousness. This forgiveness was purchased by Jesus on the cross. Cornelius and Nathanael stand in stark contrast to the Jews who showed that they did not belong to the Father, by their rejection of the Son. They were God’s chosen people

in the physical sense, but Jesus said they were children of the devil in the spiritual sense. John 8:38-44

Paul also references this Psalm in Romans 4 when he explains the doctrine of justification by faith. The Greek word translated “imputed” or “accounted” is used eleven times in Romans 4. Thus, it would be safe to say that it is the theme of the chapter. **The doctrine of imputation is at the heart of the biblical gospel. We must not render it superfluous by teaching that faith is an irresistible gift. Imputation by faith is the reason that salvation can be undeserved, yet conditional. Salvation is unconditional according to the law of commandments but it is conditional according to the law of faith.** Rom 3:27 God gives grace to the humble. 1 Pet 5:5

Even Calvinists will agree that God’s mercy must be a just mercy. It must be consistent with his absolute righteousness. An unjust earthly judge might let a favored few go free with no penalty, but it is not so with the divine Judge. He is not a “respecter of persons.” Sin must be atoned for. This doctrine must be defended at all cost. We should be willing to die on this hill. If we lose justification by faith then we lose the gospel. Calvinism marginalizes justification by faith. It does so by making faith the inevitable result of unconditional election. They render the believer’s faith perfunctory as a condition of salvation.

We know that we are justified by the blood of Christ and Jesus was raised for our justification. Rom 3:24; Rom 5:9; 4:24 Yet, we also know that we are justified by faith. Rom 5:1; Gal 2:16; 3:8 The end purpose of our faith is salvation. 1 Pet 1:9 This is not a contradiction in the Bible. Both are true and Scripture is not talking about two different kinds of justification. Imputation by faith works something like the transmission in an automobile or truck. You may have a car with some hefty horsepower but if the transmission is not engaged then the car won’t take you anywhere until it is. The gas tank may be full, the engine may be firing on all cylinders, and the tires are brand new, but if you don’t put the transmission in gear then the car won’t move. The transmission engages the power of the engine. Our penitent faith engages the power of God unto salvation.

There must be no doubt in any sinner’s mind that Jesus died to atone for his/her sins. It is a pathetic view of the gospel that would take us into the uttermost parts of the world, to tell

individual sinners that Jesus might have died for their sins . . . or He might not have.

It is backwards to assume that if someone wants to know if Jesus died for their sin, then they will first need to believe that Jesus died for their sin. This distortion is contrary to Scripture. This is not the evangelism of Jesus or the Apostles. The call to be saved by Christ is universal. As we will soon see, this is also not the way to a healthy and joyful assurance. By overcorrecting our natural bent to legalism, Calvinism sows confusion at the heart of the gospel.

We have been commissioned to go into the entire world and tell everyone the message of Christ crucified and resurrected. We are instructed to command all men everywhere to repent and believe the good news. We know that this message will save them because it was designed to save them . . . if they believe it and repent in godly sorrow. This is the gospel. Jesus said that He came so “that the world through Him might be saved.” John 3:17 He did not say that every sinner in the world would definitely be saved. Tribes and nations don’t have souls that will be judged but individual sinners do. Paul said that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. 2 Cor 5:19

No sinner should doubt that the atonement for his/her sin has been accomplished. It was finished on the cross. John 19:30 Sinners do not need to doubt if Jesus died for them, but they may need to doubt whether Christ’s atonement will be permanently imputed to their lives. If they stubbornly refuse to confess their sin and reject their need for a Savior then they will not be saved. If they perish, it won’t be because God did not love them and Jesus did not die for them. It will be because the atonement is not permanently imputed to the impenitent unbeliever. It was never intended to be. 1 John 1:9; Rom 3:26

12.9 WHY IS IMPUTATION NECESSARY IF JESUS ONLY DIED FOR THE ELECT?

In the Calvinistic view, the “gift of faith” is essentially how God *informs* the elect that they have been chosen for salvation. Faith would merely be the means through which the elect are identified. Faith would not really be a meaningful condition of our justification. It would be the inevitable result of being chosen for salvation. Remember, in the

Calvinistic system, there is no condition for our eternal destiny. Let's recall the G. I. Williamson quote:

But what is of cardinal importance is to recognize that God's sovereign determination of the destinies of the souls of men is **not conditional.**⁸

Nevertheless, in Head 2—Article 3, the Canons of Dort says the following regarding the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice:

The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin, and is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.⁹

We must first ask what they mean by “the whole world”. Here, they must be using the term in its usual and most obvious context. They mean every single person and not “all nations” or “all kinds of people” in the whole world. Both sides of our debate generally agree that Jesus Christ's death was *sufficient* to pay the sin debt of every man, woman, and child who has ever lived. However, we need to question the Calvinist on this point. I'm not sure how that could be possible in their system. If the atonement was “sufficient” for everyone's sin, and it is a “definite” and “particular” atonement, then it would actually atone for everyone's sins . . . apart from faith. **How could a “definite atonement” be sufficient to pay everyone's sin debt without actually paying everyone's sin debt?** This would not be a definite atonement; it would mean that Jesus paid for unbelievers, and that is the objection of many Calvinists to the non-Calvinistic view.

This poses a problem for the Calvinist. They really should not claim that Jesus' death is sufficient for every sinner. If the cross were only intended to secure the salvation of a predetermined elect, then why would it need to be imputed to them? Where else could it be applied? How could it *not* be applied?

The very fact that we have a doctrine of imputation in Scripture suggests that Jesus must have died for those who perish; otherwise, the doctrine of imputation by faith would be perfunctory.

In John 3, Jesus said,

“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

(Side note: It is interesting to see where, and when, the different translators use the word “might” in the various texts of Scripture, regarding the purpose of Christ. The word “might” implies some ambiguity. It doesn’t fit very well with the Calvinistic version of “definite atonement.” As you read your Bible, keep your eyes out for the word “might.” 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 4:5; Titus 2:14)

If you apply the Calvinistic understanding of *definite* atonement then you really become a Universalist. Jesus said He came not to condemn the world but to save it. Again, there is no discussion of Gentiles in the discourse with Nicodemus in John 3. Jesus’ point is clear. He is the Savior of the world . . . especially those who believe.

The fact that Jesus does not actually save all sinners from their condemnation can be hard for the Calvinist to explain, without constantly inserting the Jew/Gentile distinction into every such text. Jesus does say that He came to save the world. He is not some kind of failure if every sinner does not receive Him. Jesus washed the feet of Judas; yet Judas was not clean. This does not mean that Jesus failed. Judas failed. John 13:10

It is hard to reconcile these kinds of texts with the Calvinistic assumption that Jesus “did not die for every person who ever lived.” Remember, the Calvinist insists that there is a fixed number of people who were chosen for salvation out of the world, and Jesus only died for them. They know that some of the world will be condemned even though Jesus is said to have come with the expressed purpose of *preventing* their condemnation. In their mind, this would make Jesus out to be some kind of failure, or it would mean that the sinner must meet some kind of meaningful condition that works (synergistically) in conjunction with Christ’s sacrifice. Calvinists refuse to acknowledge such an independent condition in the process of salvation. They see that as a *merited* salvation and will have no part of it. Thus, as we have seen, they apply a very particular context of “free will” that fits their system. Unfortunately, it relegates the brilliant and glorious requirement of penitent faith into a moot point.

This is why Calvinists must repeatedly substitute the words “all nations” or “all tribes” for the word “world.” They cannot bear to think that God would desire every sinner to be saved, by the cross, without every sinner actually being saved by the cross. They are happy to assume that *someone* from every tribe or nation will be saved. That would be a safer assumption. It is more plausible, in their mind, than assuming that God actually desires the salvation of every sinner . . . but won’t get it. We see again that the Calvinist struggles to distinguish between God’s *decree* and His *desire*.

(Note: I have heard some Calvinists who seem repulsed at the very thought that God might actually desire the salvation of every sinner. I worry about them. They bear an eerie resemblance to the Jews who thought God only loved them. Luke 4:25-29 Religious pride can be found on both sides of this debate and it is always ugly.)

None of this is hard for non-Calvinists to explain. They do not assume that Jesus is a failure if every sinner in the world is not ultimately saved by His death and resurrection. The non-Calvinist understands that there is, indeed, a divinely appointed condition, which must be met in order for the soul to be saved. The condition is penitent faith and it is accomplished by the common grace of God. It is not something we could be truly proud of. (I’m sorry if the repetition is wearing you out, but I think it is necessary for those who may be new to the debate, and for those who may be skipping around in the book.)

Christ’s death was of limitless value but God sovereignly decides who benefits from Jesus’ work on the cross. God is sovereign over the forgiveness of sin and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Mankind did not decide that Jesus should pay our sin debt and give us His hard-earned righteousness. The Godhead made that decision before the foundation of the world, and we can rejoice in it. **We could repent and believe the truth with all of our hearts until we take our dying breath, but if Jesus does not go to the cross then we would still perish.**

There is only one biblical way to avoid having your sin imputed to you, apart from faith. We already examined it in Chapter 7. It is by not being exposed to any law, because “sin is not imputed when there is no law”; “where there is no law there is no transgression.” Rom 4:15; 5:13 Therefore, if you die as a child, or if you can somehow retain the ignorance of your childhood, then you will not have your sin imputed

to you. I would not hold out much hope for either if you can read and understand all this.

The Calvinist disenfranchises faith and throws repentance under the bus in order to protect his view of unconditional election. It is not necessary to protect grace in this way. Justification by contrite faith, alone, is God's way of protecting grace from works. Therefore, it is of faith that it might be according to grace. Rom 4:16 No humble believer could ever be saved without the cross. Repentance, alone, has never saved anybody. Salvation comes on God's terms and God's terms alone. Our faith receives God's grace . . . it is not the source of grace.

In the Calvinistic system, faith is tragically bypassed as a true condition for salvation. The Calvinist, in this situation, does not fabricate a mythical distinction, but instead, he neglects a biblical distinction.

12.10 SPURGEON AND CONDITIONS OF SALVATION

Everybody seems to love Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and for good reason. He was a uniquely gifted preacher and writer. He had an ability to connect with a wide variety of hearers and readers. His sermons are well over 100 years old and are still being read today. He was a gift to the Church. I want to let Spurgeon speak on behalf of the Calvinistic view at this point of our debate over election. Those familiar with the debate will have seen this quote before. The following comes from Spurgeon's Sermons, volume 4, page 228.

The Arminian says, 'Christ has died that any man may be saved *if*'—and then follow certain conditions of salvation. Now who is it that limits the death of Christ? Why, you. You say that Christ did not die so as infallibly to secure the salvation of anybody. We beg your pardon, when you say *we* limit Christ's death; we say, 'No my dear sire, it is you that do it.' We say Christ so died that He infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who through Christ's death not only *may* be saved, but are saved, must be saved and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved. You are welcome to your atonement; you may keep it. We will never renounce ours for the sake of it.¹⁰

Once again, you may not agree with Spurgeon's point but you have to love the *way* he makes it. If rhetoric is an art form then Spurgeon was a maestro, as was Augustine. Nevertheless, it is evident in this quote how the Reformed view boldly emasculates faith as a true condition of salvation. Spurgeon is clearly denying that salvation has a human condition. He is stating plainly that there is no condition of salvation in his system. He is teaching that the death of Christ, in and of itself, secures the salvation of a multitude.

The best answer to Spurgeon's question "who is it that limits the death of Christ?" . . . is God. God limits the death of Christ by being sovereign over its salvific application. The unbeliever does not savingly benefit from the cross. God decrees who will eternally benefit from the death of His Son. The Lord has promised that whoever repents and believes the truth will enjoy the everlasting atonement of Christ. The appropriate biblical language for the unbeliever is that they "might be saved" by the cross. John 3:17; Gal 4:5; Titus 2:14; 2 Cor 5:21 The appropriate biblical language for the believer is that they "will certainly be saved" by the cross. It's not real hard to understand. This answers the question of how we are to "save ourselves," or save others. Both sides agree that we do not actually save ourselves by our own goodness or authority. The Scripture only uses this language to stress the necessity of faith and the preaching of the cross. 1 Tim 4:16; 1 Cor 9:22

Spurgeon, the Calvinist, is clear. In his system, there are no conditions for salvation. No not one. As he sees it, if Christ has died for you then there is nothing for you to do in order for your salvation to be "secure." There is great irony here. No one was more faithful in calling sinners to meet "the condition" of repentance and faith than Spurgeon. I know of no preacher who has been more evangelistically eloquent than he was. Spurgeon makes no mention of faith here, even though he routinely called upon every sinner to look unto Jesus, as if his or her salvation depended upon it. It is not logical for Spurgeon to claim that there is no human condition for salvation, and yet claim that we cannot be saved without repentance and faith. Gladly, many Calvinists are resolved to live with the contradiction.

12.11 2 CORINTHIANS 5

2 Cor 5:19 is another difficult text to square with the Calvinistic view of the atonement. Paul said the following to the Corinthian *Church*,

... God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing *their* trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

Here we have Paul explaining that Jesus was reconciling “the world” to God. Isolating this verse might lead us to think that the Universalist would be correct, and every single person will be saved by the death of Christ . . . with no conditions attached. The context, of course, will not allow this, as Paul goes on to implore men (for whom it is said that Christ died) to be reconciled to God. This is hard language for the Calvinist, if indeed Paul is saying that those for whom Christ died still must be reconciled to God by the “word of reconciliation.”

If Jesus has died for someone, thereby “infallibly” securing their salvation, as Spurgeon insists, then why would they still need to be reconciled? As I have been laboring to show, in Spurgeon’s system, there are no human conditions for salvation. We saw the same thing with their view of the new birth in our last chapter. Spurgeon’s Calvinism relegates repentance and faith to a default benefit of election. It is not really an independent condition. Calvinists talk often of justification by faith and that is good. But what they really teach is “The just shall live by unconditional election.”

If the Calvinistic views of “unconditional election,” “definite atonement,” and “irresistible grace” are correct then Paul is being quite careless here by saying that God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. Both sides of our debate agree that nations and tribes are not reconciled to God, but individuals are. Both sides of our debate agree that not every person, who has ever lived, will be reconciled to God. Scripture indicates that there will be some people occupying hell. Both sides of our debate agree that Paul is not teaching universalism when he says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.”

The primary difficulty for the Calvinist here is the spirit of Paul’s statement, and the way it will be interpreted for the rest of time. Virtually every Bible reader, who has not been influenced by the

Calvinists, will read this text and properly understand it to be saying that Jesus died for every sinner in the world. It is his death, which is doing the work of reconciliation, yet Paul teaches that we must be reconciled by receiving the word. In verse 20, Paul is imploring the Corinthians to be reconciled to God, yet he has already acknowledged that Jesus died for them.

Paul's language certainly makes it sound as if God desires every one in the world to be saved, but He does not decree it. That conclusion is the opposite of the Reformed doctrine of "unconditional election." Paul surely makes it sound as if God has made an actual provision for the sins of every person in the death of Christ. How could Paul suggest that God desires everyone to be saved if Jesus only died for the elect, and He refuses to give everyone the ability to repent?

If Calvinism were correct, it would mock God, Paul, and the reprobate to suggest that God wants to save them. Why would God have Paul plead with anyone for whom Christ did not die? In addition, why would Paul need to plead with those for whom Christ died and "infallibly" secured their salvation? **We know there was real doubt about the salvation of some in the Corinthian Church, yet Paul is confident that Jesus died for them all.** We saw the same thing in Paul's letter to the Galatians. He had his doubts about some people in the Galatian churches, but He is sure that Jesus died for them. These texts are on a collision course with the Calvinistic assumption regarding the atonement.

12.12 GOD'S INTEGRITY ASSURES THAT JESUS DIED FOR EVERY SINNER

It can sometimes appear that the debate over the atonement is merely a war of words. It may not appear to be a debate of substance. If both sides agree that Jesus died for "whoever believes" then what's the big deal in how we say it? If both agree that the death of Christ is only effectual for the humble believer, and possibly children, then why should we argue about it?

We argue about it because the biblical revelation and integrity of God is at stake. One side says God does not really promise salvation to every sinner upon the condition of penitent faith, and the other side says He does. One side says God gives everyone the grace that

is needed to repent and the other side says He does not. One side teaches that the damned must really blame Adam for their plight and the other side teaches that the damned have themselves to blame for their misery. One damnation is just . . . the other is not. This is not Bible trivia. It is about the righteousness of God.

The biblical God will not be putting anyone in hell for sins they could not prevent, confess, or didn't actually commit. Teaching that God promises to save the reprobate, if they meet an impossible condition, is a sleazy deception, which would be far beneath the honor and dignity of the LORD. The real God would not promise the reprobate salvation if they trust Jesus Christ, when, in fact, He did not die for their sins. The biblical God is trustworthy.

Some Calvinist sympathizers have tried to show how our eternal destinies could be in one sense unconditional, and in another sense, conditional. But this doesn't work out very well given their strict order of salvation. If the unconditional comes first, and irresistibly causes the "condition" to be met, then the whole thing is unconditional. It can't be both . . . in the salvific sense. This is an antithetical question. **Either there is an independent human condition for salvation, or there isn't.** Either the common grace of God enables repentance and faith, or it does not. If we cannot meet the condition without being irresistibly compelled by outside force, then trusting Christ is not a truly free decision.

The integrity of God requires that a universal promise of salvation be backed up with a universal provision. In the Calvinistic understanding, the cross cannot be a universal provision. Thus, the most consistent Calvinists must deny the universal promise of the gospel.

If I go around promising to give everyone twenty dollars if they buy this book, then I had better have the money to pay. If I am a man of integrity then I will have enough money to give every person who buys it . . . twenty dollars. If I only have twenty dollars to give away, and I promise everyone who buys the book twenty dollars, but I only print one book, then that would mirror the Calvinistic view of the call of the gospel. It would be a sham. It would not really be a universal promise. In the Calvinistic system the reprobate should not be promised salvation if they repent and believe. They aren't supposed to be saved. The promise is not for them. They are not children of the

promise. As demonstrated by the Edwards' quote in section 6.4, the most careful Calvinists acknowledge this.

Could God still be considered trustworthy if He promises salvation to people who He has no intention of saving? If Christ did not die for every sinner then we should stop promising every sinner that they can be saved if they repent and trust Christ. It would be a lie for the reprobate, who may be trembling over their sin. What is the sense in summoning a dead person to court and then executing them when they fail to appear? Again, the Calvinist misinterprets what it means to be dead in trespasses and sins.

The Calvinistic view of evangelism is like telling a corpse that he could live if he eats his vegetables. He couldn't hear you, there wouldn't be any vegetables available for him, and he would be too dead to eat them even if there were. It is really kind of absurd. (He would need Miracle Max to force feed him a resurrection pill . . . if you know what I mean.) Calvinists should stop indiscriminately imploring people to be reconciled to God because they would be misleading the reprobate on behalf of God. **Calvinistic missionaries and evangelists should be telling people that they have already been chosen for eternal life . . . if they believe the gospel. This is the confusing, yet necessary conclusion of their system.**

As a former Calvinist, I cannot count the number of times, which I had to deal with the constant conflict that arose in my mind anytime I would come to a promise concerning salvation in the Bible, and there are quite a few. I could no longer, in good conscience, tell people that Jesus died to save them. I could not be sure if He did. I could not tell people that God really desired them to be saved until I was convinced that their faith was sincere. It can be hard, sometimes, to tell if my own faith is sincere, let alone someone else's. Our message to every sinner is the message of the cross because the cross is designed to save every sinner . . . if they repent and receive the Truth.

Occasionally, you will catch a Reformed teacher infer (perhaps inadvertently) that Jesus died for the reprobate. One common place is when they preach on hell. The following is a quote of Thomas Boston, a Scottish Presbyterian minister, from The Complete Works of Thomas Boston. In the section entitled "Of Hell" he says,

They [the damned] will remember that time was when they might have been made partakers of the blessed company of saints in their enjoyment of God.¹¹

This statement suggests that the damned in hell “might” have gone to heaven, but that plainly contradicts the Reformed doctrine of unconditional election. Souls in hell would have been reprobate from the foundation of the world. Therefore, there would have been no time in their lives when they might have been saved. They were never close to being saved. They never had a genuine opportunity to be saved. That is impossible in the Reformed system. **Calvinists cannot honestly tell someone who ends up in hell that they did not have to go there.** They would have “chosen” hell because they could do no other.

As we have seen, Calvinism teaches that the damned were rejected for any hope of salvation before they were born. All of the prayers and passionate gospel preaching in the world could not possibly help them. They were not chosen for salvation. Therefore, it was not possible that they “might have been made partakers of the blessed company of saints in their enjoyment of God.” To put it in the vernacular, there is no way in hell that the reprobate could avoid hell in the Reformed view of salvation.

Another such example is provided by J.I. Packer. In his discussion of Definite Redemption from his Concise Theology, he said the following:

Those who reject the offer of Christ do so of their own free will (i.e., because they choose to, Matt. 22:1-7; John 3:18), so that their final perishing is their own fault.¹²

At least Dr. Packer infers that the gospel should be offered to everyone, but his defense of Calvinistic reprobation rings hollow. Here again, we have to endure the Calvinistic chicanery with the term “free will.” As we have shown, Calvinists believe that those who perish are not given the free will, liberty, or power of contrary choice to receive the “offer” of Christ. This is because they were not chosen for salvation. They have been left with absolutely no ability to embrace Christ. They are utterly incapable of desiring to choose Christ. The Calvinist needs

verbal gymnastics with the term “free will” to make damnation, in their system, appear to be just. **In the Reformed system, those who finally perish will do so because Adam’s transgression left them with no freedom, liberty, or ability to repent and choose Christ. It would be entirely Adam’s fault if any of his descendants perish, and that would not be a just judgment.**

Is it just wishful thinking to believe the promise of the gospel is a good faith offer of salvation to every single sinner on earth? Or is it biblical? Can we not take God’s word at face value when He says, “Look to me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I am God and there is no other?” Is 45:22 (For my part, I can no longer believe that God is merely saying that all different kinds of people should look to Him and be saved. I tried for years but I can’t do it anymore.)

12.13 JESUS TASTED DEATH FOR EVERYONE AND BOUGHT FALSE TEACHERS

The writer of Hebrews said that Jesus

. . . was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He by the grace of God might taste death for everyone. Heb 2:9

Here again, the writer of Hebrews is being very careless if he wants us to think there is no salvific sense in which Jesus died for every person. Calvinistic writers would virtually never use this kind of “loose” language in the context of the atonement, yet the Bible uses this kind of language routinely. It is one thing to suggest that the term “world” should be understood as all kinds of people, or all nations, but it is even more difficult to interpret “every man” or “everyone” as all nationalities of sinners. The Spirit of God inspired the writer of Hebrews to use the term “everyone” instead of “every nation”. There must be a reason.

Similarly, Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said that false teachers “. . . deny the Lord [Master] who bought them.” 2 Pet 2:1 Here we have Peter stating that Jesus “purchased” false teachers who will bring on themselves swift destruction. **This is one troublesome text for the Calvinist who ignores the distinction between**

the unconditional payment of the debt and the conditional imputation of the payment through faith.

These false teachers are in serious trouble yet Jesus clearly paid for their salvation. The context of this verse is saying that Jesus died for those who will not be spared from eternal destruction. They are committed unbelievers . . . yet Jesus bought them. The most logical and biblical conclusion to be drawn here is that the payment is not permanently imputed to their account because they are really unbelievers. They have fallen from the grace they enjoyed as children. This is consistent with the rest of Scripture, especially those texts that tell us to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and we will be saved by Jesus Christ. In the biblical system, the cross justifies when it is imputed to the believer. Our faith is a condition of justification, not the result.

The texts we have listed present a formidable obstacle for the Calvinistic version of limited atonement. Many Calvinists will often call these texts “puzzling” or “difficult.” This is why most Calvinists rely on the argumentation prowess of men like John Owen. The rank and file Calvinistic pastor tries to avoid a serious defense of their view of the atonement. It is hard to explain to the average churchgoer who understands these texts at face value. Once again, the Calvinistic view is simply not how the Bible reads to the average person. It never will be as long as translators maintain their integrity.

The texts, which show Jesus to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, tasting death for everyone, and purchasing false teachers, are not problems for the non-Calvinist. It is perfectly reasonable that the effect of the cross is only imputed to genuine believers. It will not be imputed to those who persist in stubborn and willful unbelief. When we leave the place of childlike faith, we come under condemnation. If we do not *turn back* to childlike faith then we will perish. Mt 18:3

12.14 ARE THE SINS OF CHILDREN COVERED BY THE BLOOD OF CHRIST?

This is a good place to revisit the question of children who die in childhood, and those who are mentally handicapped. Are they saved? Can they be saved? Do they even *need* to be saved? Christians on both sides of the debate over election have been divided on this question.

I suppose that real Calvinists only need to ask if the child was unconditionally chosen before the foundation of the world, since that is the true bottom line in their system. (See the Westminster Confession—Chapter 10 Section 3) Yet, they will likely admit that such ambiguity is not much comfort at the funeral services of children and the handicapped. It is especially distressing in light of their conviction that children are born dead in sin, and the handicapped are to blame for being born with their disability. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that human empathy is not a biblical argument, so we should look more into this question.

As you can imagine, this is an issue where passion runs high and the debate can really heat up. Nevertheless, we should not run from the question. It can help us to understand the nature of God and His salvation. It might help us to understand the difference between the two main positions in our debate over election. We should be slow to be dogmatic here as Scripture does not clearly define childhood, nor does it state, explicitly, what happens to every single child who dies in childhood. Likewise, the Bible says very little about the mentally handicapped. Nevertheless, we can carefully glean from what is revealed.

First, we should ask if infants, children, and the handicapped are sinners. If so, then we need to determine if the guilt of their sin is imputed to them. Small children certainly do exhibit bad behavior, as do the handicapped. But it is often difficult to conclude that they know what they are doing, or if they can prevent the bad behavior. Of course, this is irrelevant to the committed Calvinist who insists that it would be just for God to send people to hell even if they could not prevent their actual sin. Their natural inability would not be a valid excuse for sin. However, the rest of us would like to think that God is just . . . by His own definition of justice. If the sins of infants, small children, and the handicapped are imputed to them, then we must determine if they can be forgiven without the ability to understand and believe the truth. If not, then we should reasonably assume that they would perish forever if they die in their ignorance.

We have already seen, in Chapter 7, how historical Calvinists teach that children who die in childhood, at least, *deserve* to perish because they are born dead in sin, and it is essentially their own fault. They teach that God imputes the guilt of Adam's sin to the account of

everyone who is ever born. Remember, Matthew Henry said that when children are born with some kind of sickness or handicap it is proof that they must be born *guilty* of some sin. Therefore, it is fair to assert that if children are born guilty then they deserve to perish in hell. They would need to be forgiven in order to gain entrance into heaven.

We saw in Psalm 51 that David said he was conceived in sin. In Romans 5, we saw that “many were made sinners” as the result of Adam’s sin. If we couple these biblical teachings with the observable fact that all children commit acts of sin, then it should not be too hard to answer our first question: Yes, *children are sinners*. It may not be their fault but they commit sins. You don’t need to be a Bible thumping Christian to come to this conclusion. Just observe some children for a short while and you will conclude that foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; or you will deny the obvious. Prov 22:15.

Our next question is a key to the whole debate. **Does God impute the guilt of the sins of children to their account?** If He does then children who die in childhood could be justly left to perish. If their sin was *not* imputed, then there would be some legitimate hope for them, if they die in childhood without understanding the truth. If God does not hold them accountable for their sin then it is reasonable to conclude that He would not send them to hell for it. Therefore, we need to search the Bible and see if the sins of children are imputed to their account. If we do not find an explicit answer to that question (and we won’t) then we may ask if Scripture teaches that it could be possible (and just) for God to impute their sin to them. As noted before, we do know some things about how sin is imputed and how it is not. See if you can follow the following.

As we saw in our previous discussions, we know that sin is not imputed where there is no law, and where there is no law there is no transgression. Rom 4:16; 5:13 These statements confirm that it is possible for someone to sin, yet not have the guilt of that sin imputed to their account. (This is cause for great rejoicing. Otherwise, there would be no hope for anyone.) If children are not accountable to any law then they could not have the guilt of their sin imputed to them. It is reasonable to conclude that the sins of small children will be Adam’s responsibility since he is the one who brought sin into the world in the first place. Note: it is possible that Adam was a believer and Jesus would have covered his sins on the cross. These could include the

myriad of sins that were committed by small children who inherited their sinful nature from Adam. Thus, they violated the law of God without knowing it, or being able to prevent it.

If the sins of babies and small children will not be imputed to them then we might ask if the sins of older children, who may understand the basic elements of the law, are imputed to their account. We certainly observe the effects of the sinful nature in all children, at all ages of childhood. They disobey their parents and often demonstrate real animosity toward righteousness. At the same time, we do see in children, as they grow up, some ability to obey the law. We see their consciences beginning to work. This is consistent with Paul's teaching in Romans 1 & 2. In addition, we observe in children an ability to trust the wisdom and truth of God. This is also supported by Jesus when He set forth the faith of children as an example of saving faith for adults. Mt 18:1-5 The ability to believe the truth is a gift which is given to everyone who could have the guilt of their sin imputed to their account.

Now we need to ask how it would be just (or fair) for God to overlook the many sins committed by every child ever born. If Adam was not forgiven, then how could it be possible for the guilt of these sins to be forgiven? **This is where it is important to believe that Jesus died for every sinner who ever lived, from Adam on.** The reason that God can justly withhold the imputation of the guilt of our sin, as children, is the same reason that He is just to withhold the imputation of sin from adult sinners, who confess their sin. The reason is the redemption purchased on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is another reason to insist that Jesus "tasted death" for every sinner who ever lived.

There comes a time in every person's life when they understand that their sin is a violation of God's law, and they do it anyway, in spite of the ability to resist. As stated before, I believe this is what Paul was talking about when he said that he was "alive once without the law." He said when the commandment came, "sin revived and I died." Rom 7:9 It is reasonable to conclude that this occurs when our own sin can be justly imputed to our own account. We become dead in trespasses and sins. We can no longer blame our sin on Adam's irresistible influence; thus we bear the culpability for our own deliberate sins. Some would call this an "age of accountability." It is not a biblical

term but it could be a biblical concept. (Both sides of our debate believe in doctrinal concepts that do not have precise biblical names. Terms like unconditional election, total depravity, limited atonement, irresistible grace, the Trinity, and common grace are not used explicitly in Scripture, but the terms are used to describe concepts, which are thought to be biblical.)

There is a sense in which anyone who ends up in hell . . . will have lost their salvation. If they had died as a child, they would have been saved by the blood of the Lamb. Instead, they stubbornly persisted in willful sin. Thus, there no longer remains a sacrifice for their sins. Heb 10:26 The universal effects of the cross are revoked. Mt 18:21-35 Indeed, “how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” Heb 2:3 That statement is nonsensical for the reprobate, according to the Calvinistic view, because they are not chosen for salvation. It would not be genuinely offered to them, yet it must be genuinely offered . . . in order to be neglected.

12.15 CAN THE CROSS BE APPLIED TO THOSE WHO NEVER HEAR ABOUT IT?

This might be odious for some of my readers, but don’t be too quick to burn the book just yet. We can be sure that Christ did cover the sins of those believers who never heard of Him *prior* to His coming. We know that those who are memorialized for their faith in Hebrews 11 never heard the name of Jesus, yet God was not ashamed to be called their God. They looked for God’s city. They died in faith and they were not all Jewish. We also know that the only atonement that can permanently wash away sin is the atonement of Christ. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Heb 10:4 Therefore, these famous believers would enjoy the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, but they could not have known it with the same certainty that we may enjoy, now that Jesus has come.

Thus, if the Bible does not explicitly teach otherwise, then we should reasonably infer that Christ’s sacrifice could be imputed to those who never hear about Him, *after His coming*. They must repent and believe like those who were justified by faith before Christ’s coming. The next question is obvious. Believe what? What truth must they

believe if they never hear the name of Jesus? Answer: The same truth, which believers in the Old Testament dispensation believed. They must believe the truth, which was written on their hearts, seen in the natural revelation, and found in any Scriptural, prophetic, or angelic revelation to which they may have been exposed. (Note: it is OK to use the word “dispensation” sometimes, just not around the children.)

Scripture does not say, explicitly, that those who never hear the gospel must be presumed to be lost or reprobate. Scripture does explicitly state that those who reject Jesus will be lost. Jesus was the embodiment of the truth. If anyone was a humble believer in the natural revelation then they will believe the message of Christ. If they rejected the attributes of God as seen in the natural revelation and written on their hearts, then they would reject Jesus who was one with the Father. Rejecting Jesus is rejecting the truth of God . . . and rejecting the truth of God is rejecting Jesus. John 3:33; 14:6

He who believes in Him [God’s only begotten Son] is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. John 3:18

Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am *He* . . . you will die in your sins. John 8:24

The specific gospel of Christ is not very good news to those who reject it. But you can’t reject it until you have heard it. I believe there is a progression of responsibility here, regarding faith in the truth. Those who saw and heard Jesus, in person, will be held accountable to that extraordinarily high degree of exposure to the Truth. Those who heard of Him, firsthand, from eyewitnesses will be held to that lesser degree of personal knowledge. Those who have heard of Him through the Scriptures will be held to that degree of revelation. Those who have only heard about Jesus from others will be held to that lesser degree of knowledge. Those who have only heard about Jesus from charlatan preachers will be held to that measure of revelation. Those who have never heard about Jesus, except as He is hidden in the true revelation of nature and conscience, will be held to that rudimentary degree of knowledge. Unto whom much is given, much will be required. This is the nature of the “law of faith”. There would be more hope for

someone who has never heard of Jesus than for someone who has heard of Him, from a credible witness, and rejected Him. The gospel does indeed divide people. Luke 12:51 It is impossible to be a fence sitter once you have heard about Jesus. You will be either for Him . . . or against Him. Mt 12:30

Humble belief in God's truth is no different now than it was before the coming of Christ. That which has dramatically changed is the amount of Truth and Light now available to the world since the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. But for those who never hear about Jesus there has been no change in the amount of truth and light available to them. They remain in the "times of ignorance," as it were. Acts 17:30 They will be judged based upon what they have been given.

Remember, God explained to Job, in no uncertain terms, that in spite of the presence of evil, He expects us to trust Him based on the natural revelation. Job's faithful patience is even more remarkable when you consider that he never heard about Jesus and probably had no Scripture. Job had the revelation of creation on which to base his trust, and creation contains some very impressive evidence for the trustworthiness of God. We remember that God bluntly and poignantly reminded Job of some of the things which He has made. It is quite clear from God's response that He thinks it is reasonable to expect us to trust Him . . . even if we never receive any revelation beyond the creation. The things, which God created, are observable to every one . . . all over the earth . . . every day and every night. Moreover, the truth is written on our hearts. Like Abraham, Job believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Neither of them had ever heard of the man Christ Jesus. Job 38-41

It is a mistake to assume that the coming of Christ has changed the biblical pillar of justification by faith. Humble faith in God's truth is how sinners have always been justified. The coming of Christ has made faith even more reasonable now, to those who hear about Him. God's revelation of Himself, and His will, has been gloriously amplified to those who have heard the gospel through the witness of the Apostles. It was amplified even more to those who saw and heard Jesus in person. It was a marvelous blessing to see and hear the Only Begotten Son of God. It also brought greater responsibility.

Even those who hear the gospel from charlatan or untrained preachers have still heard enough of the truth to spawn faith in Christ.

The simple claims of the gospel, alone, are enough to make anyone pause and give it serious thought. This is why Paul could rejoice that Christ was preached even when He was preached out of envy and pretense. Phil 1:15-18

We must remember that Rahab was not Jewish and she believed God . . . savingly. Noah, Abel, and Enoch were not Jewish. They lived before there was a written Old Testament, and long before Jesus. Paul also makes the point that Abraham was justified by faith *before* he was circumcised and set apart to be the first patriarch of the Hebrew people. Rom 4:10 There was no such thing as a Jew when Abraham was declared righteous by faith.

We also know that Jesus was clearly pleased with the faith that He found in those who were not Jewish. It is reasonable to believe that they were already primitive believers in the Father when they met the Son. They would not have known as much about the true and living God as the Jews would have known, but the law of faith was in effect in their lives. They knew God in a simple way and they recognized Him in the person of Christ. It stands to reason that those who have not heard of Jesus *after* His coming could be justified by faith, as did those who did not know about Him *before* His coming. Mt 8:10; 15:21-28

To repeat yet again, sin is not imputed when there is no law, and where there is no law there is no transgression. Jesus told the Jews that if He had not come then they would have no sin. John 9:41 He did not mean that they were not sinners. He meant that they would not be guilty of rejecting Him, personally, if they had never known Him . . . personally. Jesus told the Jews, who rejected Him that they did not believe in Him because they were not of His sheep. They were not given to Christ by the Father because they did not belong to the Father, by faith. Not yet anyway. John 10:26-29; John 5:31-47

The “law of faith” works this way. Rom 3:27 The same principle is at work today in those who live and die without hearing the gospel. They will be justified by their faith in whatever degree of truth they have been exposed to. On the other hand, they will be condemned for rejecting the truth to which they have been exposed.

The atonement of Christ is not applied to those people who willfully and habitually sin against the light of God’s revelation. Heb 10:26 The atonement will be applied to those who walk by faith in the light which they have been given. Jesus helped us to understand this

principle (or law) of faith when He said that it would be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the Day of Judgment than for those who rejected Him, after witnessing His miracles and hearing His words. Mt 10:15 He did not necessarily mean that every person destroyed in Sodom would be eternally forgiven . . . or condemned. He meant that those who were given the blessed privilege of witnessing the Son of God would be held to a higher expectation of faith.

This makes much more sense than assuming that God will hold people accountable for failing to do that which they were not capable of. Yet, this flawed understanding of justice is a foundational premise of the Calvinistic teaching. If you punish your kids for failing to do that which is impossible, or if you punish them for disobeying commandments you never gave them . . . then you will make a fine Calvinist.

Those who perish in hell will be those who encountered the truth, knew it was the truth, and defied it anyway . . . without remorse. They did not sincerely confess their own willful, preventable, and habitual sin. The efficacy of Christ's atonement cannot be justly applied to their sin. It will not be applied. If they had died in the ignorance of their childhood then their sins would have been covered. But there remains no sacrifice for those who sin willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth. Heb. 10:26. Jesus was most angry with those who knew who He was, but still refused to follow Him. On the other hand, Jesus prayed from the cross that the Father would forgive those who "do not know what they do." Luke 23:34

At one point of apparent exasperation with the unbelieving Jews, Jesus exclaimed, "You both know Me and you know where I am from." John 7:28. This is a startling statement. It is especially troubling for any Calvinist who insists that these Jews were "spiritually dead" and therefore unable to comprehend the spiritual things of God. It shows that these Jews were rejecting their Messiah with their eyes wide open, and that requires a capacity for spiritual understanding. Later, Jesus told the Jews that they *did not know* Him. John 8:19 We should not assume that Jesus was confused. This is an example, again, of how the same word can have different meanings in different contexts. Jesus is showing that there are different contexts in which we may "know" Him. We have already noted this distinction.

When adults commit murder in the name of “YHWH,” or “Jesus,” or “Allah,” they are acting contrary to the law, which is written on their hearts. They should know better, even if their parents, culture, and religious leaders told them it was OK. The universal effects of Christ’s atonement are withheld from them if they persist in suppressing the truth. As we will see shortly, this helps us to understand the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18.

Those who end up in hell, in spite of the cross, will be those who knowingly sin without godly sorrow. They will persist in sin with no contrite confession. These will certainly include Jews and professing Christians who persisted in willfully sinning against a great deal of light. Like Judas, they were given great proof of the trustworthiness of God yet they refused to trust Him. They do not confess their sin even though they know it to be sin. Unbelief accuses God of being an incompetent liar. Those who perish may also include those who never hear the gospel but persist in willful sin against the law, which is written on their heart. You don’t need to hear the gospel of Christ to know what sin is. You don’t need the gospel to recognize your need of repentance before God.

The story is told of Helen Keller, who after hearing the gospel of Christ, said: “I knew Him . . . I knew Him . . . I just didn’t know His name.” The story is also told of a Brahmin who heard the message of the cross of Christ. He said, “If that isn’t true . . . it ought to be true.”

Likewise, a Chinese scholar, upon hearing the gospel, is reported to have said, “Didn’t I tell you there ought to be a God like this?”

I freely admit that these reports are not inspired Scripture but they do serve to corroborate Paul’s teaching in Romans. In spite of our natural corruption, the invisible things of God are clearly seen in the things that are made. Everyone receives the common grace of God as well as the corruption that we inherit from Adam. It is not one or the other . . . it is both.

Occasionally, some pagans have witnessed extraordinary displays of God’s power. For example, Pharaoh was “privileged” to be an eyewitness of God’s “mighty arm” revealed through the plagues in Egypt. Pharaoh will be held accountable to a higher expectation of faith than someone who never sees such a display of God’s power. The same is true of those who witnessed Jesus’ miracles, and the miracles

performed by the Apostles. Unto whom more light is given . . . more faith is expected. We are not able to live perfectly, or understand every mystery, but we can confess our sin in genuine contrition.

We should take this opportunity to remember that every person, born of Adam, has witnessed divine miracles. In fact, we get to observe these miracles every day. The creation itself is an awesome display of the supernatural power of God. Now I am aware that our universe runs on some pretty reliable scientific laws. However, until someone can figure out how the Creator has always existed, and how He brought all this magnificence into being, *from nothing*, then we are wise to admit that the cosmos is a supernatural display, which declares the glory of God. Every single person of sound mind can deduce that men did not put the galaxies into place. Men haven't even been able to get people outside of our own "little" galaxy and get them back alive. Ps 19

Adam's influence notwithstanding, every sinner knows that God must have created the heavens and the earth . . . by the time they are teenagers. Indeed, the divine attributes are seen in the things that are made. Men will be without excuse if they fail to honor Him, even if the creation is all they ever see or hear of God. God will not be put in debt by anyone.

We must not assume that those who never hear the gospel will all be saved by Christ, but we need not assume that they cannot be saved by Christ. Jesus died for the whole world. He did not merely die for those who hear about Him. Like Abel, Noah, Abimelech, Rahab, and others who demonstrated faith without the knowledge of Christ, they could also be saved by Christ. The problem is that they will never know the blessed assurance that is available to those who have heard, trusted, and followed Jesus. Their salvation will be in doubt until they can respond to the gospel.

This view does not "rip the heart" out of evangelism. It compensates for the lack of evangelism. It properly honors the work of evangelists and missionaries. No one will perish because the Church failed to get them the message. If anything tips the heart out of evangelism, it is the Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation. Evangelists would be pleading with some sinners to be reconciled to God even though God doesn't want to be reconciled with them. They would be pleading with sinners to repent who had no ability to repent. It would be a frustrating exercise in futility and confusion. In the biblical scenario, those who reject the

gospel will have done so in spite of the ability to believe it. Their punishment will be justified.

12.16 CAN THE ATONEMENT BE REVOKED?

The parable of the unforgiving servant can be troubling for any believer. In Matthew 18:21-35 we find the story, which Jesus told about a servant who was forgiven a very large debt by his king. The same man then refused to forgive a fellow servant of a much smaller debt. As you may remember, when the king heard about it he was angry. He turned the man over to the jailers until he could entirely pay off the debt . . . *which had been forgiven*. Apparently, the debt was not permanently forgiven. It seems that there was a continuing condition required for continuing forgiveness.

Jesus said that this parable explains an aspect of the kingdom of heaven. He gave this parable in response to the disciples' question about forgiving one another. We understand that the king represents God and the servants represent sinners. Some find it difficult to believe that God would give someone a gift and then take it back. Many of us would be horrified to think that God might forgive us and then "change His mind" and revoke our forgiveness.

Here yet again, it is important that we understand the conditional nature of our forgiveness and the nature of saving faith. The parable was given in the context of personal forgiveness. It is a parable about God's sovereign right to impute the guilt of sin. This is also a parable about the permanent and continual nature of sincere contrition. This parable teaches us that repentance is not done once and never again. It is a continuing state of heart. Only when repentance is done continually are we forgiven and washed . . . forever. Our willingness, or unwillingness, to forgive others reveals the true nature of our own personal repentance. "Godly sorrow" engenders forgiveness to others but "worldly sorrow" does not. Worldly sorrow does not care about God or anyone else. It cares only for the self. 2 Cor 7:10

The servant in the parable was forgiven because he asked for mercy. The man *begged* for patience. If our eternal forgiveness before God is merely conditional upon one single plea for mercy, which may or may not be sincere, then we might have to question the justice of this judgment. If our forgiveness is not contingent upon an independent

condition, as Calvinism insists, then the parable makes no sense in the context of salvation. (We will see in the next chapter how the biblical view of saving faith is circumvented by the typical altar call and similar evangelistic methods.)

Most would agree that it is dishonorable to give a gift and then take it back, unless the gift was somehow conditional. Note: the first servant was in no position to demand or expect forgiveness, as if the king owed it to him. Forgiveness is not like a paycheck that is earned. By its very nature, forgiveness is always a gift of grace; however, this does not mean there can be no condition for receiving the gift. Such is the case in this parable and the forgiveness of God. It seems that the king's permanent forgiveness was conditional upon the servant maintaining a spirit of genuine humility. The first servant's humility was not genuine; therefore, it was not permanent. When it was time to extend forgiveness to another, he forgot from whence he had come. 2 Pet 1:9; James 1:24

Biblical forgiveness is not conditional upon keeping the law of commandments. The unforgiving servant lacked a contrite spirit; therefore, his forgiveness was not permanent. Likewise, if we abandon our childlike faith then we will no longer enjoy the universal grace of the cross. It will be justly revoked because it is conditional upon keeping the faith, which works through love. Mt 18:3; Gal 5:6

Once again, we see how important it is to understand that salvation has a truly independent condition, but it is a condition, of which no one could be proud. Our forgiveness of one another exposes the contrite nature of our own faith, or it exposes the lack of it. Unforgiveness exposes our pride and God resists the proud. They will not stand upright before Him. He gives grace to the humble. They come before Him on their knees. This is the eternal decree of the sovereign God. It is predestined. It won't be altered. The atonement of Christ will cover every child, but it will not be extended to those who ultimately suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

12.17 IS JESUS MOCKED IF HE DIED FOR THOSE WHO NEVER BELIEVE?

Calvinists will often complain that if Jesus died for every sinner then God is not getting what He paid for, in those who do not believe. In their mind, this would make God out to be some kind of failure. This would only be true if the intent of the cross was to redeem *and apply* the redemption . . . in and of itself. It was not. The life and death of Jesus was intended to pay the ransom that is sufficient for every sin ever committed. But it is not the purpose of Christ's death to *impute* that righteousness to any sinner. Christ's righteousness is imputed to the contrite, through their faith. It is not imputed by the cross, apart from faith. So says the Scripture. Rom 4; Gal 3 . . .

The Calvinist fails to see the appropriate difference between the payment of the cross and the imputation of it to individual sinners. He bundles them together as one. Scripture does not. There aren't any texts, which teach explicitly that the life and death of Christ *imputes* righteousness to adults apart from faith. It is clear that righteousness is imputed through the faith of the sinner. **Jesus died so that every sinner might be saved and every believer will definitely be saved.**

In the biblical system, the guilty sinner plays a vital role in the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, but he plays no role in producing that righteousness. Again, this is why faith is the perfect condition of salvation. Christ alone must redeem, but sinners must individually claim the promise of mercy in order to benefit from the redemption. **If Christ's righteousness is not imputed until the sinner genuinely repents and trusts the truth, then Jesus will get exactly what He intended.** God never intended to impute the perfect righteousness of Christ to unbelievers. His ransom payment will be rewarded by the release of every believer from the eternal consequences of their sin. They will be saved from the wrath of God. The cross was intended to save all who believe and it always will. God won't be "ripped off" and the doctrine of imputation will make sure of it.

Also, this Calvinistic objection would attempt to rob God of His sovereignty. If God wants to purchase the redemption for the entire race, by the once for all sacrifice of Christ, and some don't want to

receive it . . . how does that make God a failure? It is not God's fault if they refuse His grace, unless He forced them to refuse it. I don't think that even the most hyper (or supra) Calvinists would teach that God forces the reprobate to be obstinate. Calvinists err in their speculation of how God must use His sovereignty and omniscience. Their system forces God to manipulate virtually everything in order to get His way. The biblical system is not so simplistic. The biblical God is so brilliant that He can accomplish His will without irresistibly "causing" our decisions.

We know that Jesus healed 10 lepers at one point in His ministry but only one returned to give thanks. This does not necessarily mean that God failed to secure their public gratitude. Luke 17:11 He also washed the feet of Judas but it did not make Judas clean. John 13:10 We need not assume that Jesus is some kind of failure, but He is very gracious and patient. It is a sad reality that God does not receive all of the glory that He deserves for His grace in our lives. This includes the lives of Christian believers. We often fail to thank Him properly and speak up for Him in public. This does not mean that we are not truly saved, but it does mean that God is very patient and longsuffering. God's grace and patience will be magnified through His judgment on those who ultimately refused to be thankful. Rom 1:21

We see in Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus, that those who perish in Hades will be there for their failure to hear Moses and the prophets. Those who perish in hell will know they are suffering as the result of their own arrogant suppression of the truth. They will not be condemned because of Adam's sin and God's refusal to help them. Luke 16:19

It is evident that Jesus made a great sacrifice by becoming a man and bringing us "the words of eternal life", but this does not mean that He always got a salvific return on His investment. The washing of the gospel is designed to work in the souls of penitent believers. We long for the day when we will give God His just due in terms of honor, praise, and worship. **The death of Christ for the world will not be wasted on those who never believe. It will serve to leave them utterly without excuse.** They trampled under foot God's love. They chose their fate in spite of the ability to repent. Indeed, hell may be especially hot for those who clearly heard and understood the gospel . . . and spurned it.

We sometimes hear Christians claim that if they were the only person on earth then Jesus would have endured the cross to save them. It seems that Jesus would not have to suffer any more, or less, if there was one lost sinner or 1 trillion. I believe they are right. It seems that in the economy of God, the cross was a sufficient payment for every person who ever lived, but the efficacy of the sacrifice was only intended for those adults who repent and believe. They will be Christ's Bride. They are the elect.

Those in hell will have themselves to blame for their misery. They were not chosen for salvation, because God predestined that only believers will eternally benefit from the sacrifice of Christ. They chose unbelief in spite of a tremendous amount of evidence for belief. The unbeliever will stand before God in their own righteousness, which is exactly what they wanted. They will get what they deserve. Life is serious business. It's not about picking a religion that suits you . . . it is about coming to the knowledge of the Truth . . . and trusting Him.

12.18 HOW CAN WE “SAVE OURSELVES?”

Jesus said, “Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. Mt 16:25

Jesus also said to many that he healed, “Your faith has saved you.” Luke 7:50; 17:19; Mt. 9:22

Paul told Timothy to “take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.” 1 Tim 4:16

Paul also told Timothy to “fight the good fight of faith” and to “lay hold onto eternal life.” 1 Tim 6:11-12

This kind of language gave me fits when I was a Calvinist. It just didn't jive with the system. I did not think that we could do anything to be saved. Instead, I thought salvation was done *to us*. I thought salvation was supposed to be unconditional and grace had to be irresistible, or God did not get all the glory. There could be no “willing and running” in any aspect of salvation . . . I thought. Nevertheless, if salvation does

not require a resistible condition then these texts are big problems for the serious student of Scripture. Salvation not only has a condition but the condition requires a great deal of effort. Faith is not something that is done to us. It is something that we must do ourselves, by the grace of God. In addition, faith is not something that we do in a moment . . . and it is finished. Saving faith is a lifelong pursuit. In the next chapter, when we finally look at assurance, we will see that our faith must be *kept*. If our faith is not permanent faith then it is not saving faith.

It was God who made the plan of salvation conditional. It was not Pelagius, Cassianus, Arminius, or John Weslius. God decreed it to be conditional. Also, please remember that we could confess our sin all day, every day, and then perish in hell, unless Christ pays our ransom. The debt had to be paid and He is the only one “rich” enough to pay it. Any hope that repentance and faith in God’s mercy will save us is useless, if Jesus does not go to the cross. Gladly He did. He paid it all. The cross is the glory of God and the only hope of mankind. The song says it well:

I will not boast in anything. No gift, no power, no wisdom.
But I will boast in Jesus Christ; His death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from His reward? I cannot give an answer;
But this I know with all my heart: His wounds have paid my ransom.¹³

12.19 THERE IS NO SALVATION WITHOUT JESUS

The Bible does not open the door to salvation by other religions or worldviews. By teaching that someone could be saved without hearing about Jesus, it could be misunderstood to assume that sinners could be saved *without* Jesus. But as any Bible believer knows, it is impossible to be saved without Jesus.

. . . for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. Acts 4:12

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus. 1Tim 2:5

I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through Me John 14:6

Jesus is the Truth. He is present in all truth . . . including the truth which is seen in nature and written on every heart. In this sense, Jesus has enlightened “everyone.” John 1:9 It is a fact of Scripture that some people were saved without knowing who Jesus was. They were “of the truth.” They had been “taught by God” and they learned the lesson of God’s trustworthiness. They belonged to the Father by faith. By faith, they looked for a city whose Builder and Maker was God, but they did not have any specific knowledge of Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus was their Savior. A few of them are listed in Hebrews 11.

Their salvation was legally just (or fair) because Jesus was the propitiation for the sins of the whole world. 1 John 2:2 If the people listed in Hebrews 11 had heard about Jesus then they would have believed in Him. He was the Truth and His message would not contradict any other truth, which they already believed. The gospel would serve to confirm the truth, which they already believed.

The gospel would also enable them to better separate the lies of false worldviews from the truth. If they already feared the real God then the gospel would be very good news to them. Their natural knowledge of the law would draw them to Christ. The gospel will bear witness and corroborate the law, which has been written on their hearts. The gospel is great news for the contrite. Once someone hears and believes the truth about the only begotten Son of God, then in the depths of their heart they will reject Diana of the Ephesians, Mohammed, Buddha, Marx, etc. They will no longer worship animals or ancestors. They will forsake their humanistic hope in the virtue and ingenuity of man. They will reject the false teachings of karma or the hope of salvation through the laws of Moses. Jesus stands far above all who would claim to be speaking for the real God. The more familiar with Christ we become, the more evident is His unique superiority.

Some teachers will typically insist that there is a massive change in the way sinners are saved since the coming of Christ, but there is not. The just have always lived by faith in the truth . . . and they always will. The massive change that occurred with the coming of Christ is the *amount of truth* that is now available to the world. Jesus was the Light of

the world. Never has the Light shined so brightly on this dark planet as it did when Jesus was here. Heb 1:1-4; John 14: 6; 8:12

Now it is up to the Church to reflect that light. We don't always reflect that light accurately, but God's natural revelation can never be totally eclipsed by our weakness, hypocrisy, or error. True believers who lived prior to Christ were saved by the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus, which they never witnessed. Likewise, true believers who live after the coming of Christ are saved by His death and resurrection, which they never witnessed. Very, very, very few people actually saw Jesus and heard Him speak in person. The rest of us will have to believe the testimony that has been passed down from the Apostles. Gladly, the biblical record confirms that which we see in the natural revelation and the law written on our hearts. We know that we are messed up. We need a Savior.

The hearts of the contrite crave the gospel. They have "learned from the Father." They are drawn to Christ. Moreover, the gospel helps create true contrition of heart when it is properly presented. The humble will gratefully cling to the message of the cross. The heart of the proud will spurn the cross as foolishness. 1 Cor 1:18 The message of Jesus provides a brilliant "shibboleth" test of true saving faith, as well as providing the means through which we are saved. It does both.

Remember what Jesus said of those who were rejecting Him:

If I had not come and spoken to them they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. John 15:22

Jesus is not saying that these unbelievers were not sinners. He was saying that they would not be held accountable for the sin of rejecting Him, if He had not come and spoken to them. He is saying that the excuse is removed now that they have heard His wisdom and seen His miracles. The excuse is similarly removed when credible missionaries and evangelists bring the truth of the gospel to those who have never heard it. Admittedly, it is not the same as seeing Jesus alive after the resurrection, but the truth of the gospel bears witness to the truth that is written on our hearts. It may not be the same as meeting the "Truth" in person, but it is nevertheless the truth. The gospel will divide those who have been humbled by the law from those who have suppressed it, and hardened their hearts to it.

Those who never hear of Jesus could not possibly enjoy the assurance that comes with the knowledge of Jesus, but we don't need to assume that they must perish. They could never be able to "see" the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ unless, and until, they come to know Him. 2 Cor 4:6; Mt 17:2 Again, as we saw with Nathanael, someone could be a believer in the Old Testament revelation before meeting Jesus. Jesus acknowledged Nathanael's faith before Nathanael even knew who Jesus was. John 1:47 Nathanael had learned from the Father, and thus he received the Son. He was drawn to Christ by the Father. If Nathanael had died before meeting Jesus, he would have gone to heaven. Perhaps he would have been among those who were miraculously raised from their graves when Jesus died. Mt. 27:52-53

Let's reinforce all this by looking at the biblical account of Cornelius. His experience of God's grace presents a formidable problem for the committed Calvinist, and many non-Calvinists. Cornelius was a Gentile centurion. He was said to be a devout man and one who feared God with his household. He generously gave money and always prayed to God. His prayers and alms had ascended as a memorial before God. All this took place *before* Peter introduced him to Jesus. This is where Calvinists must awkwardly force their theories on real life situations. They must try to reconcile the experience of Cornelius with their deficient view of common grace. Acts 10

Their contradiction is fairly obvious. How could Cornelius be "dead in trespasses and sins" according to the Calvinistic definition, and still be a devout man who feared God? How could he be stone cold dead to the things of God and yet have his prayers come before the Lord as a memorial? How could Cornelius be described as "cleansed" by God if he had not already experienced the washing of regeneration? How could he be a devout man who feared God if he was a slave to sin and incapable of receiving the things of God, as per the Calvinistic opinion? (Section 8.2 – Pg 167) A consistent Calvinist really must agree that Cornelius was already born again before he heard about and believed on Jesus.

This is also a big problem for anyone who expects a dramatic and supernatural conversion experience in order to be forgiven by God. Peter makes this even more difficult for them when he said,

In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.
Acts 10:34-35.

Peter said this *before* he told Cornelius about Jesus and before the Holy Spirit fell upon them. Cornelius was justified by faith. It is very reasonable to assume that if he had died before meeting Peter then he would have gone to heaven. Cornelius would not be saved by his works of righteousness. He was saved by God's grace through his faith, and his faith was producing righteousness. Now he is adding to his faith the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is obtaining a precious faith in Christ . . . like Peter's. It is a tremendous blessing and gracious privilege to hear about Jesus, especially from one of the Apostles. 2 Pet 1:1 God does not have to give everyone this kind of extraordinary blessing in order to judge them fairly.

This story teaches that it is possible to be justified by a rudimentary kind of faith in the true God; yet the preaching of Christ brings a dramatic upgrade, if you will, to our faith. Cornelius had already been visited by angels, but when the faith of Cornelius graduated to the knowledge of Christ, the Holy Spirit came with Pentecostal power. This was to validate Christ as the Truth, and confirm Him as the only begotten Son of God. It also validated Peter's Apostleship and demonstrated, to the Jews, that Gentile believers belong in God's kingdom. They always have, but this was a mystery; especially to the Jews who looked down on Gentiles as if they were dogs. (Or even worse . . . cats.)

It is noteworthy that Luke's record, in Acts, never quotes Cornelius making a profession of faith in Christ apart from his baptism. It is evident that he came to faith in Christ and this is proof that his rudimentary faith would have been saving faith if he had died without hearing about Jesus. Jesus died and rose again for his justification. He just didn't know it until he heard from Peter. I have no doubt that Cornelius was very glad that Peter came and bore witness to Christ. He found much greater peace, purpose, and strength in the knowledge of Christ. Peter certainly gave Cornelius good news. Cornelius now knows the Truth that will deliver him at the final judgment.

Lastly, when the Lord told Paul to stay in Corinth, He said that He had "many people" in that city. Acts 18:10 This does not necessarily

mean that those people were unconditionally chosen for salvation and would need to be saved, by irresistible force. Those people would not have to be unconditionally elect in order for God to know their hearts. This could simply mean that God knew that there were souls in Corinth who would believe the gospel when they heard it. Some, like Cornelius, may have already belonged to the Father by faith, but they still needed to hear about the Son. They may have been “God fearing” or they may have been raunchy unbelievers, who would become believers through the preaching of the cross. It seems that there were both kinds of sinners in Corinth. 1 Cor 6:9

12.20 A FINAL THOUGHT ON THE ATONEMENT

When the Calvinist insists that Jesus did not die (or make atonement) for every sinner, in spite of the many biblical texts which teach that He did, it is much like the global warming debate. Some smart people keep insisting that the earth is getting warmer and warmer . . . and it is man’s fault. But this gets really hard to believe if you have experienced a couple of years with below average temperatures in your region of the world. We experience the weather to be doing what it has always done. It fluctuates. We tend to trust our own observations in spite of the smart people telling us that the whole earth is warming at a dangerous pace.

Likewise with the atonement, some smart people keep telling us that Jesus did not die as the propitiation for every sinner, but this is not what we see when we read the Bible for ourselves. We tend to trust our own eyes over the confusing opinion of some experts. The Calvinist will forever be battling the way the Bible reads regarding the death of Christ for the whole world.

13.0 The Assurance of Salvation

13.1 BACK TO THE BABY IN THE STUDY OF ASSURANCE

Let's return to our original illustration. Let's suppose the new baby's name was Joe and he is all grown up now. Let's say Joe is a professing Christian. His parents did raise him in the church and taught him the gospel. He says that he believes in Jesus. He went forward to "receive Jesus as his Savior and Lord" at a summer camp evangelistic service when he was 14. His dad died, after a grueling battle with cancer when he was 17. Things got a little crazy in college where he partied a lot and experienced some real doubt about the faith. Nevertheless, he now attends and supports a church. He helps the poor. He is reliable and respected at his job. There's only one obvious problem . . . Joe is a homosexual. He claims that he was born that way and it is natural . . . for him. He does not believe it is sin.

What can we say, *biblically*, about Joe's assurance of salvation in this scenario? (As you probably know, this is not an unrealistic set of circumstances.) We are not asking if Joe is saved or lost. We know that he must be one or the other, and God certainly knows the state of his soul. We are asking *if Joe* can be certain about his salvation. Can his family and friends be certain? Would his faith be sincere or is he an unforgiven hypocrite? Could his faith be sincere? He says that he trusts the cross and he does bear some good fruit. He says that he loves Jesus but claims that homosexuality is not sinful, even though the Bible teaches that it is. Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:9 What should we think about Joe's assurance of salvation? Should someone confront him in love? Should they leave him alone, or even encourage him in his lifestyle?

Or, what if Joe *struggles* with homosexuality? Perhaps he confesses it as sin but he's weak in that particular area. Perhaps he gives in to temptation when he has had too much to drink. (Both are problems he developed in college, partying with friends, and trying to cope with the loss of his dad.)

Would this question be easier if Joe was not gay but his problem was gluttony? What if he eats too much . . . or he smokes . . . and he watches a lot of dribble on television?

What if he's not gay but leaves his wife to live with another woman yet still claims to be safe in Christ? (This is becoming so common that some even call it "normal.")

What if Joe gets drunk once in a while but thinks it's no big deal? What if he gets drunk once in a while but confesses it as sin?

What if Joe is married but has a bad temper and/or a porn habit, and claims that he can't help it? He says that God has not given him the grace to get victory over these sins, even though he has often prayed for help. He assumes that God must not want him to be free of these sins, since He has not given him enough grace to get victory over them. He says that he can better appreciate the depths of God's love when he is struggling with his "bad habits."

What if he is a prosperous businessman, salesman, lawyer, or minister but he tells lies everyday to make his money?

What if Joe is quite blameless in his moral conduct and gives to the poor; yet he is secretly trusting in his obedience and good works to atone for his occasional sins? He doesn't think that he needs the cross because he is not that bad of a person.

What if he is relatively blameless in his moral conduct but never sets foot in the church, or is uncomfortable talking about Jesus and doesn't read the Bible?

What if Joe was secretly abused as a child by one, or both, of his parents, and he just "can't" forgive them?

What if Joe says he can no longer keep the faith, after his child died in an accident?

As you can imagine this list could go on and on. Life can be messy. What can we say about Joe's faith in all these scenarios? Would he possess contrite faith, which works by love? Would he be among the elect? Can we say that he *might* be saved, at least in some of these situations? Is there a difference between the sin of homosexuality and the sin of over eating in the context of assurance? **Does the presence of sin in our lives diminish or compromise our assurance?** If so, would any sin compromise our assurance, or just the really big ones?

If you are having a hard time deciding then you are probably not alone. Biblical assurance is not always easy. Our fruit can be a mixed bag of good and bad, even as believers. I hope to show how the Calvinistic teaching of irresistible salvation muddies the water even more.

We should keep our perspective in this. Both sides of our debate will likely agree that there is more to life than just being saved from sin and its consequences. Indeed, we do need to be freed *from* sin . . . but we are called *unto* something, as well. We are to be transformed into the glorious image of Christ. This is where the real joy and pleasure of life is found. The great purpose of life goes beyond being forgiven.

You may not need the following list, but here are a few scripture references, which will serve to establish the importance of the subject now at hand. We will examine a select few more closely.

13.2 SOME BIBLICAL TEXTS ON ASSURANCE

Jesus told believers, “If you abide [remain] in My word, you are my disciples indeed. John 8:31 He also said that many will come to Him on the Day of Judgment, assuming to be saved . . . only to find out that they were not. Mt 7:21

Jesus told the Parable of the Sower/Soils, which explains the need to keep the faith and bear fruit. It seems to teach the real possibility of falling away. Mt 13; Lk 8

Peter says that we need to make our calling and election sure. 2 Pet 1:10

Paul told the Corinthians to examine themselves and see if they were in the faith. 2 Cor 13:5

Peter exhorts those who have obtained like precious faith in Christ to add virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love to their faith. This would enable them to be certain that God will provide them an entrance into the kingdom. 2 Peter 1

Paul instructed the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, but he did not correct or rebuke them for any particular problems in their church. Phil 2:12

John said that he wrote his first epistle so that believers may know they have eternal life. 1 John 5:13

According to Jesus, we need to make sure that we have enough “oil” for our lamps. Mt 25:1-13

We need to remember Lot’s wife and finish our race of faith. Lk 17:32; 2 Tim 4:7; Mt 24:13

We should strive to be certain that our faith is not “vain” or “in vain.” 1 Cor 15:2

Paul told the Colossian “saints” that Christ has reconciled them to God “if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel . . .” Col 1:21-23

It appears that a man named Demas was a fellow laborer in the gospel with Paul, but later forsook him. Paul said that Demas “loved this present world.” And John said that if any one loves the world then the love of the Father is not in him. Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:10; 1 John 2:15

Paul told Timothy, who was called to eternal life, to lay hold on eternal life. 1 Tim 6:12

The writer of Hebrews speaks of drifting away, neglecting salvation, departing from the living God, coming short of entering into God’s rest, falling away, drawing back from belief to destruction, and dying in faith. Heb 2:1-3; 3:12; 4:1; 6:6; 10:39; 11:13

It is clear that assurance is a biblical matter. If a final judgment is coming after we die then the assurance of salvation is a very important matter. We cannot thoroughly study election without studying assurance. We can’t study biblical assurance without including the new birth. The Bible clearly makes the connections, yet the new birth is still something of a mystery. Remember, Jesus likened the spiritual rebirth to the wind, which we cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. John 3:7-8 Thankfully, the New Testament has taken some of the mystery out of the new birth. If anyone has access to a Bible then they will have a lot of helpful instruction on how to obtain a full and joyful assurance of salvation.

We have seen from Scripture that saving faith is contrite, and it works by love. Hab 2:4; Is 57:15; Gal 5:6 The texts just listed make it clear that saving faith must also be permanent faith. It will last. Therefore, if we can establish that our faith is contrite, and works by love, then we may be confident that our faith will persevere. We will be saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Up to this point, I have tried to show that the Calvinistic system is derogatory to the character of God. It's a serious charge that is tempered by our ignorance of God's omniscience and how the mind makes choices. It is here, in the doctrines of assurance that the errors of Calvinism can make an already difficult doctrine . . . more difficult. Their system engenders confusion and is prone to a dangerous presumption.

This is also a place where many Christians have become “one pointed” Calvinists. They crave the eternal security of the Calvinistic system but reject their supporting doctrines of unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and original sin (minus a potent common grace). It is safe to assume that most believers would like to know if the assurance of salvation is available for those of us who do not always think and walk, as we should. I am quite sure that you have wondered if there is any assurance available for those who sometimes fail to be faithful, obedient, loving, and contrite.

I am happy to acknowledge that many Calvinists and non-Calvinists find themselves in basic agreement over the doctrines of assurance. Many non-Calvinists do not align themselves with historic Arminianism on this point. It is also true that Calvinists do not always agree with one another on the subject. First, we will see how some Calvinists can get downright confusing on the subject of assurance. After that, we will examine the biblical teaching.

It is clear in Scripture that God desires every believer to maintain a healthy caution regarding their eternal security. Our faith can ebb and flow; therefore, it is reasonable to think that our assurance could also rise and fall. Bunyan's Pilgrim spoke wisely after his visit to the Interpreter's House. It was there he saw several scenes, which were both encouraging and frightening. He said:

They put me in hope and in fear.¹

That is the biblical formula for the assurance of salvation, and The Pilgrim's Progress is a wonderful manual on both the *perseverance* of the saints and God's *preservation* of the saints. Bunyan wonderfully captures the mysterious merging of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in the doctrines and experiential process of salvation.

13.3 THE REFORMED CONFESSIONS ON ASSURANCE

Let's look, once again, to the Westminster Confession. Chapter 17 is about the Perseverance of the Saints. It says:

- I. They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.
- II. This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.
- III. Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.²

Here, we can see that the Reformed view of salvation by *irresistible grace* is as plain as day. The Confession is clear. Those who have been chosen to receive faith will absolutely keep the faith, and it does not depend on their free will, liberty, or power of contrary choice. Our keeping the faith, as believers, would merely depend upon God's choice. In the

Calvinistic view, if you were chosen for salvation then you cannot be lost. You could not fall away, believe in vain, neglect salvation, depart from the faith, draw back from belief to destruction, or fail to finish the race. Thus, we see again, that it is valid to describe Calvinism, as a “Christian” form of fatalism.

The first and most obvious problem for the Calvinist is the language of Scripture in the previous texts on perseverance. It is not possible, in the Reformed view, for someone who is dead in sin to ever actually be in the race of faith; therefore, they could not drop out of it. In their understanding, a sinner could never have any saving faith; therefore, they could never lose it. You can't lose something you never had. This is also where historical Calvinists conclude that saving faith is an irresistible and infallible gift. But they are forced to acknowledge that the gift of faith may not always produce recognizable results in those who are chosen to receive it. Calvinism teaches that the “gift of faith” would infallibly result in forgiveness but not consistent obedience. **In other words, the “infallible” gift of faith is not very infallible, in terms of our trust and our subsequent conduct.**

This smells a little funky since the faith that justifies and the faith that produces our sanctified conduct are the same. The Calvinistic view creates an awkward and unbiblical disconnect in the relationship between saving faith and our conduct. This becomes another hair splitting distinction, which is hard to support from Scripture. Indeed, Scripture does not say that we are justified by our conduct, but it does teach that there is an inseparable relationship between our conduct and the personal assurance that our faith is genuinely saving faith.

Perhaps you can see how this takes us back, yet again, to the fundamental question of whether salvation has a truly voluntary human condition, which is enabled by the common grace of God. If our salvation is conditional upon our faith, and our faith is proven sincere by our conduct, then our conduct will have direct bearing on our assurance. Our conduct does not contribute to our redemption, but it contributes, vitally, to our assurance. This is an important distinction in Scripture.

If our faith is truly “our own faith”, which we have by virtue of God's common grace, then it is reasonable to assume that it might not always overcome temptation. It might be spurious faith. If it were spurious then it would not be saving faith. “Our own faith” would be

fallible. This is illustrated by Peter when he panicked while walking on the water. It was also demonstrated, again, by Peter when he denied Christ. It is reasonable to think that our own faith might ebb and flow as it struggles against the world, the flesh, and the devil. This would put the primary responsibility for our sin and doubt *upon our own shoulders* and not Adam's . . . or God's. This makes more sense in light of the Scripture's teaching on the nature of faith.

In Hebrews 11, we saw that saving faith was demonstrated by the actions of the heroes. We see that Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, Samson, David, and the others are memorialized for their *acts* of faith. They were not memorialized for their mere *professions* of faith. They actually trusted God and it showed in their conduct. But even the heroes did not always act in faith. This was also demonstrated by their conduct. Their fruit was a mixed bag. Their faith was sometimes remarkable . . . and sometimes pathetic. Samson's great acts of faith would indicate that he was a justified believer . . . but some of his other actions (which were not so great) would indicate that he lacked saving faith. Our heroes had feet of clay and so do we.

This section of the Confession might lead to the assumption that elect sinners could somehow be sure of their salvation without demonstrating any measurable sanctification, godliness, or love in their lives. Thus, we see the reason for the next chapter in the Westminster Confession. Chapter 18, Of Assurance of Grace and Salvation says:

- I. Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.
- II. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our

spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.

III. This infallible assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of every one to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.

IV. True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which wounds the conscience and grieves the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of His countenance, and suffering even such as fear Him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never so utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the mean time, they are supported from utter despair.³

Whew! Another Westminster mouthful. One mustn't read the Confession in a hurry. These sections of the Confession are pretty long and somewhat confusing. First, we have to question how anyone who is dead in sin, by the Calvinistic definition, could possibly have a "carnal presumption" or "false hope" in Christ. If they are dead in sin, as typically described by Calvinists, then they could not have *any kind* of hope in Christ because that would require some measure of spiritual sensitivity and enlightenment. Their enmity towards God (and Christ) would prohibit them from the assumption that they even need to hope in Christ. They would hate God and reject Jesus altogether. Remember, Calvinists believe that unregenerate man *cannot see anything*

desirable in God or Christ. They want nothing to do with the real God or the gospel. They would be wholly incapable of doing any good and inclined to all wickedness.

It seems that sinners, who are “stone cold dead” to the “things of God,” in the Calvinistic view, can still manage to fake the Christian life pretty well. They may be spiritual corpses on the bottom of the Sea of Total Depravity but they can somehow look and act like real believers. Such would be the case of Cornelius. Some Calvinists will insist that Cornelius was lost and unregenerate when Scripture describes him as a devout man who feared God . . . before Peter bore witness to Jesus. (See John Piper’s book, Jesus—The Only Way to God. Must You Hear the Gospel to be Saved?)⁴

Next, we see the alleged possibility of an “infallible” and “certain” assurance of salvation. Westminster then says that this infallible assurance may be diminished and intermittent. This poses a problem. If an infallible assurance can be diminished and intermittent then it is not very “infallible.” I think the writers want to teach that our assurance can be shaky, but not completely lost. In their view, God would not permit a true believer to abandon the faith altogether. This might sound great, but again, it emasculates faith as a truly voluntary and independent condition of salvation. **God would irresistibly be in control of the believer’s “volitional” faith . . . and that doesn’t make sense. If God ultimately controls our faith then we would not possess a true liberty of choice.**

In addition, it seems that this “infallible” assurance might take a while to kick in. Here, they agree with the non-Calvinist who says that saving faith does not necessarily result in full assurance. The Confession is saying that our free will has nothing to do with our perseverance and then it says that our assurance may be diminished by falling into sin. I don’t think they can have it both ways.

We need to ask one basic question here at the beginning of our look into assurance. **What level of certainty should we be expecting of an event that is yet to come, after we die? Does Scripture even offer the degree of assurance that we might desire?** Westminster is denying that we need any “extraordinary revelation” to know what will take place at our future judgment, but such information would have to come by extraordinary revelation. It is hard to believe that a finite and fallible sinner could have an “infallible” knowledge regarding any

future event, especially an event, which occurs, on the other side of the grave. (To be fair, this is a point of disagreement among some Calvinists. Not all Calvinists will subscribe to the Westminster view of assurance . . . but they probably should.)

The kind of absolute assurance, which is claimed by some Christians (both Calvinist and non-Calvinist), is really quite remarkable. (Especially for those who teach that the prophetic gifts have ceased!) This kind of assurance would actually serve to circumvent the very purpose and nature of faith. This should not be a surprise, coming from Calvinists, who have already emasculated the nature and role of faith by teaching that it is an irresistible gift. God places great value on our personal trust in His revelation, but a Calvinist is someone who has removed the element of independent trust from saving faith. They view faith as a kind of supernatural and irresistible miracle, which is only given to the elect. They view faith the same way they would if God irresistibly gave the elect wings, which could only fly to heaven.

Many are looking for divine revelation that goes beyond the biblical promise of God. They seem to desire a perfect foreknowledge of the final judgment day, and when they don't get it, they conjure up a doctrinal theory to support their craving for it. I suspect that this view could be an over reaction to the Roman Catholic views on salvation and assurance. The Roman Catholic position *directly* ties our conduct to our actual justification. It is easy to let all this slip into a justification by obedience and this is what the Reformers fought so hard to correct. It is a critical distinction.

So what is the nature of our assurance? Can we be certain of our final residence in the kingdom? If so, are there degrees of certainty? Perhaps we can begin to answer this question . . . with another question: How sure do you want to be? What kind of due diligence are you prepared to invest in the assurance of your salvation? We have already seen that you can make no investment toward the procurement of your redemption. Christ has already purchased it, and it would be grievously insulting to Him if we think that we could contribute to our atonement. He finished the job on the cross. Nevertheless, the question remains, how certain can we be that the effects of His universal cross work will be imputed to our eternal account.

In the church, we often speak of “giving our life to Christ.” It is a way of saying that we have yielded to His Lordship and we trust in

His universal promise of mercy. But let's think about that statement. How long does it take to give your entire life to Christ? A couple of minutes after a sermon? No, I think you know how long it takes to give your entire life to Christ. It will take your entire life. **We desperately need to get free of the notion that saving faith is merely done once, in a moment of time.** We need to see that saving faith must be maintained until we die. Jesus said, "If you abide [remain] in My word, you are my disciples indeed". [John 8:31](#)

Bunyan's pilgrim would not be stopped by his skeptical friends and family. He would not be deterred by the Slough of Despond, the Hill of Legality, Doubting Castle, Apollyon, or Mr. Worldly Wiseman. He refused to stay in Vanity Fair, even though they probably had some nice homes on a championship golf course with a huge lake stocked with big fish. Vanity Fair probably had a nice mall with a multiplex theatre and an outlet center that discounted all of his favorite brands. No, this pilgrim had his sights set on the Celestial City. He would not settle for any short term and rinky-dink earthly alternatives.

Every sinner may enjoy the gospel promise of certain salvation to those who die in faith, but we do not have a specific and extraordinary revelation of what will happen to our faith during the rest of our lives. Neither do we have a perfect knowledge of what we each will experience on the Judgment Day. We have the conditional promise of God that if we keep our faith, then He will provide us an entrance, and welcome us into His rest. It remains to be seen if we keep our faith. We may be asking for more specific knowledge than God wants to give us. **Again, we must not marginalize the great biblical theme of justification by faith. Persevering faith is the human condition of salvation. Thus, it is the primary condition of our assurance.**

Question #146 of the Catechism to the Philadelphia Confession of Faith takes a much shorter approach to the question of assurance. It asks:

Can the saints of God feel assured of their final salvation?

Its answer:

Yes, they may be sure of their calling and election if they keep God's commandments.⁵

This answer is a little too short and could be misleading. It lends itself to presumption and/or despair. A better answer would be, “Yes, they may be sure of their final salvation if they keep their faith, and saving faith is best proven by the humble confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, combined with a practice of loving obedience to His commandments. These commandments include the moral laws, charitable works, and the forgiveness of others.”

This answer strives to capture the essence of the biblical salvation and the biblical recipe for assurance. We are not justified by keeping God’s commandments. We are justified by faith. Saving faith works by love and therefore our faith must be proven genuine by our love. This is consistent with the many ways in which the biblical writers command us to love God, love our neighbors, love the brethren, and even love our enemies. Jesus said, “If you love me keep my commandments.” His commandments include the moral laws, which are written on every heart. They include the command to love our neighbor as ourselves, especially when they are in need. His commandments include the command to forgive others of their trespasses against us.

To be fair, the Philadelphia Confession does not teach that we are saved by keeping the commandments. This is clear in other sections of the Confession. They are saying that *assurance* comes through keeping the commandments. But their answer to question #146 is dangerously incomplete. It makes it sound as if we can be sure of our salvation based on our obedience alone; thus it could be easily misunderstood to teach that we are saved by keeping the commandments.

Let’s take a brief look at the confusion that is found among some Calvinists on the subject of assurance. After that, we will set forth the biblical teaching, which is agreed upon by many Calvinists and non-Calvinists.

13.4 THE CALVINISTIC CONFUSION OVER ASSURANCE

We have seen how Calvinists teach that we can’t do anything, which contributes to our salvation, but we must choose to repent and have faith in Christ in order to be saved. That, by itself, is confusing. We have also seen how Calvinists believe that faith is an *irresistible, yet voluntary* condition of salvation. That also is confusing. They teach that everyone is essentially guilty of a sin, which took place before they were born.

That is even more confusing. We have seen how Calvinists insist that Jesus did not die for every sinner in the world; even though Scripture emphasizes the fact that He did. We have seen that Calvinists rely heavily on their perception of how God must use His sovereignty and omniscience, even though God has not explicitly revealed these secrets. **All this confusion leads to more reliance upon teachers who can ably defend doctrines, which are inherently unclear. This steers people away from the Bible and toward the writings of men.**

Let's examine how the tentacles of confusion extend to their doctrines of assurance. One of the most dangerous side effects of the Reformed system is in this area. I hope you have begun to see why. In their system, anyone who does not want to go to hell may logically conclude that they are born again. Why? Because in their view, the unregenerate hate God, and would not care if they perish or not. Similarly, those who have any lukewarm love for God may be sure they are saved, and those who have any kind of superficial faith in Jesus could enjoy the assurance of salvation. This is because unbelievers would be so totally dead in sin that they could not possibly show *any* signs of spiritual life or respect for the things of Christ.

If lukewarm hypocrites are totally depraved, by the Calvinistic definition, and bereft of the common grace that is needed for saving faith, then how could they demonstrate any fear of God, or love for the truth? According to the Calvinistic view, they could only have animosity for God and utter contempt for His Word. **Thus, people who profess any semblance of faith may be sure of their salvation . . . in the Reformed system.**

We know that unbelievers and the lukewarm can honor God (even Jesus) with their lips. Isa 29:13; Mk 7:6 They are not so totally disinclined to the things of God that they can't acknowledge spiritual truth. Sinners can know that God should be honored even if they are dead in sin. To be fair, it is clear that most Calvinists will try to guard against this overt presumption, as we saw in Chapter 18 of the Confession. But the simple logic is too much to overcome. In the view of many Calvinists, any hypocrite who demonstrates some outward faith and love for Christ could be "sure" of their salvation. This would be due to the fact they are not shaking their fist in God's face or utterly without any spiritual understanding. Therefore, strict adherence to the Calvinistic system makes assurance too easy. **Calvinists have their**

own doctrines, in part, to blame for the “easy believism” they often decry.

We saw in the Westminster Confession that the elect do not persevere by “their own free will.” This mocks any notion of human responsibility, in terms of our meaningful participation in the process of assurance. It seems that, in the purest form of Calvinism, sinners don’t do anything apart from irresistible grace to be saved, and they don’t do anything, apart from irresistible grace, to be sure of their salvation either. The most consistent Calvinist is uncomfortable with the notion that a sinner might be able to “do” anything, apart from irresistible grace, that would contribute to his salvation or assurance. This often fosters a false humility and tosses any meaningful human responsibility into the dumpster.

Here is a helpful question: If sinners are capable, by God’s common grace, of responding in faith to the Truth, would it rob God of His glory for our salvation? I’d say no, but the Calvinist typically says yes. This is why he theoretically emasculates, nullifies, circumvents, or categorically rejects any *independent* participation in the process of salvation . . . even if it is humiliating and enabled by the common grace of God. In his view, we would be robbing God of His glory if we could honestly admit that we are helplessly in need of a Savior. They assume that if we were actually capable of confessing our sin, by the common grace of God, then we could brag about it. We see, once more, why this is a debate between grace and irresistible grace.

Calvinists seem to think if we confess our *unrighteousness* then we should be able to boast about it. This could only be possible if our confession was insincere. I suppose, if we vaingloriously confess our sins in order to show others how “humble” we are . . . then our confession would be a cause for boasting in a twisted sort of way. I think Calvinists are especially sensitive to this, since they are required to admit that they are somehow culpable for Adam’s sin. This would be in spite of the fact that they did not commit Adam’s sin. It is impossible to sincerely confess a sin that you did not commit.

This fear of boasting may also be the reason why R.C. Sproul would make the following comments in his 2005 CD series on Assurance. In the message entitled Assurance Enhances Sanctification, he makes some statements that may surprise the average professing Calvinist, as well as the average Christian.

R.C says:

It's a misunderstanding to think . . . that we must perform the fruit in order to get the assurance.

Also:

The reason why we are to seek our assurance is that we might bear fruit.

One more time to be sure:

It is not that we bear fruit in order to be assured, we need to be assured to be fruit bearing Christians.

R.C. made those puzzling comments after he had already said,

The fruit saves no one but if there is no fruit, that means there is no spiritual life.

And,

. . . where there is spiritual life there will inevitably, necessarily, and immediately be some fruit.⁶

Perhaps, I just can't keep up, but this is why laymen can get exasperated with theologians. We don't mind if our theologians exercise their "prerogative to make distinctions" but we want the distinctions to make sense. Either we need to bear fruit to be sure of eternal life . . . or we don't. The Bible is saying in plain terms that we do, and our conduct is a vital component of our fruit. R.C. seems to be saying that we can (or must) be sure of our salvation *apart* from bearing fruit, yet we can't be sure of our spiritual life without bearing fruit. Maybe I'm just in over my head but that seems like a confusing contradiction. In a similar vein, in his series on spiritual growth, R. C. also said that we are not going to make any progress in spiritual growth until we get the issue of assurance *settled*. (See the lecture on assurance, part 2).⁷ It seems clear that he is saying that our assurance is not based on our growth.

R.C. teaches that acquiescence to the Calvinistic system is the primary route to assurance. In his six lecture series on assurance, he takes the long way around, through the “ordo salutis” to explain that if you have *any love for Christ*, at all, then it should be sufficient proof that God has regenerated you. This would be his ultimate test of assurance. This, as you might have guessed, is because you allegedly hated God before He regenerated you. Even if you have believed the gospel from your youth and never knew a day in which you did not believe in Jesus . . . you still hated God before he regenerated you.

It seems that a five year old child, who offers a heartfelt prayer before bedtime, must be born again, even if he/she grows up to be an ungodly skeptic. Or, we must assume that a five year old, who has not been born again, by the Calvinistic definition, cannot utter a heartfelt prayer which would be honored by God. All such prayers from children should be assumed insincere until they can articulate the Calvinistic order of salvation. This would be in spite of Jesus’ remarks about children, their faith, and their place in the kingdom. Mt 18, 19 Remember, in the Reformed view, everyone had to hate God as children because we were born dead in sin. “Dead in trespasses and sins”, in the Calvinistic view, means that the sinner absolutely hates anything to do with God and His Word. Even as a child.

Surely, R. C. believes that unbelievers can *think* they love God. He knows how deceitful the heart is. Jer 17:9 R.C is assuming that the contrast between our hatred of God before regeneration, and our love for God after regeneration, would be as night and day. If it were true, then things would be much simpler, but I’m afraid that this is not the actual report from the front lines, nor is it the assumption of Scripture. The testimony of virtually all believers is that the struggle for preeminence within our hearts continues after we acknowledge faith in Christ. Some would even say that the struggle becomes more intense after we have professed conscious faith in Christ.

R.C.’s proposed acid test for assurance is dangerous. It is a safe bet that many unbelievers *think* they love God. There are child molesting church leaders who would passionately profess to love the biblical God. There are practicing drunks, lovers of money, adulterers, murderers, and false teachers who claim to love God. I’ll bet Judas may have thought he loved Jesus . . . before he betrayed Him. **I have heard many Calvinists question the salvation of professing Christians,**

and each one of those suspected phonies would profess to love God. R.C.'s assertion only pushes back the critical answers to the question. We should have no quarrel with the assertion that loving God is the preeminent ingredient to a healthy assurance. We will see this in Scripture. However, the practical question remains, "How can I distinguish between genuine love for God and insincere love for God?"

I would be willing to bet that most brand new believers could answer that question. In John 14:15, Jesus told the disciples, "if you love me, keep my commandments." (Or, as some translate it, "If you love me, *you will* keep my commandments.")

In John 14:21, Jesus essentially repeated the same teaching. "He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me."

One might think that we would obviously know if we loved the LORD, but the biblical writers recognize the deceitfulness of sin, even in the hearts of professing believers. In 1 John 5:2 we have one example, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments."

Love is best proven by our actions . . . not our theories about God's omniscience. Talk can be cheap and emotions can be fickle, even among believers. The man who says he loves his wife, but cheats on her, is embellishing his love for his wife; or he's just plain lying. It is a weak and superficial love, which engages in an illicit affair. Our love for God can ebb and flow, as does our faith. David may have loved God during the nightmare with Bathsheba, but who could be certain of it . . . until his conduct changed? This is why the question in the Philadelphia Catechism said that we could be sure of our salvation if we keep God's commandments. It does not teach that we are saved by keeping the commandments, but obedience is an essential ingredient to our assurance of salvation. It validates our faith. This is a crucial distinction, which must be maintained.

We should acknowledge this point: **It may be possible to love God without proving it by our actions, but God would be the only One who could be sure of that love.** As sinners, we can be much more certain that our love is genuine when it is backed up by faith in Christ, plus visible obedience. Our love will also be proven by true contrition, when we fail to be obedient. We don't have God's infallible view of the heart. It is not explicit in Scripture that the sealing

and indwelling of the Holy Spirit brings an infallible view of our own faith and destiny. Anyone can claim to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit but the proof will be evident in our conduct. There are plenty of people running around claiming all kinds of spiritual blessings and revelations, but they often don't live any more soberly, righteously, and godly than unbelievers. Talk . . . without walk is not sufficient for a biblical assurance of salvation.

The thief on the cross would never have any more opportunity to keep the commandments or do any good works. Nevertheless, it would be reasonable, based on his words, to think that he both trusted and loved Jesus. His contrite confession and request for mercy would have given us some real hope, but deathbed conversions can be suspect. He did acknowledge himself a sinner. He also acknowledged Jesus to be sinless and to be the King of Kings. The man's words on the cross should be considered as "fruit" even though they were only words. However, if it were not for Jesus' extraordinary response to the man's plea for mercy, then we would not be able to have the same degree of hope for his soul. Jesus' prediction of their upcoming heavenly reunion made this man's eternal destiny a virtual slam-dunk. The rest of us do not get that degree of revelation regarding our own souls. But we do get the same promise . . . if we keep our faith.

R. C. believes that the first place to look for assurance is the Calvinistic order of salvation. It is puzzling that a pastor of R.C. Sproul's stature would give an entire lecture series on assurance without expounding on the book of 1 John. John's letter was written so that we might know if we have eternal life. As we will see shortly, the most thorough biblical answer to the question: "Am I born again" is found in 1 John. It seems that God was not overly worried that we might misinterpret John's words to be teaching salvation by the works of the law.

13.5 DAVID BRAINERD'S TESTIMONY ILLUSTRATES THE CALVINISTIC CONFUSION

At some point, all of our theories on election must meet up with real life experience. Fortunately, most Calvinists do not take their doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace to their most logical extreme, when it applies to their own assurance. A few have

tried. The testimony of David Brainerd is an example of the confusion that occurs when someone really takes Calvinism seriously. It seems that the poor young man went through all kinds of agony trying to decide if he was unconditionally elect and irresistibly converted. He was probably a believer long before he would dare to let himself believe it. There is some irony in David Brainerd's story. In spite of his formidable intellect, it seems that his *feelings* played a huge role in his assurance. (See The Life of David Brainerd, a compilation from his diary by Jonathan Edwards).⁸

Brainerd describes years of intense internal wrangling trying to find the perfect state of mind, which fit his fatalistic view of conversion. He said that Romans 9:11-23 was a "constant vexation" to him. (I don't know who directed him to draw his assurance from Romans 9, but it was a mistake, even if he was Jewish.) He kept waiting for God to do that which God expected (and equipped) him to do. It took him years of analyzing his own motives and feelings before he finally decided that God really loved him and Jesus actually died for him. He wrongly assumed that the common grace of God was not enough to enable simple faith in the truth. He was pleading with God to give him something, which he already had. He began agonizing over his desire to be unconditionally elect when he was about 8 years old.

All of his documented internal anguish sounds quite pious, especially when compared to the easy assurance that is given out by many today, both Calvinist and non-Calvinist. He couldn't (or wouldn't) accept the fact that he bore the marks of the new birth long before he concluded that he was chosen for salvation. It appears that coming to Christ in childlike faith was just too simple for him. His struggle was, in an odd way, logical. **I think Brainerd was trying to determine experimentally if he had been irresistibly enabled to meet the condition of an unconditional eternal destiny. It does get confusing.** He was looking for his experience to line up with his flawed doctrines.

It seems that his Calvinistic indoctrination got in the way of his peace, assurance, and fruitfulness for several years. He was also setting an unbiblical standard for the assurance of others. This can lead to pride and a condescending contempt for the experience of others, who did not need years of navel gazing to acknowledge their need for a Savior, and trust the word of the cross. Please don't misunderstand.

There is a sense in which we must continue to scrutinize our faith for our entire lives, not just a few years as young people. To hear the testimony of some, you would think that their race was essentially over, in a moment of time, before they reached puberty. The truth is . . . they were just getting started. David Brainerd's testimony does not reflect the testimonies of faith found in Scripture.

Also, concerning Brainerd's testimony, I don't see how anyone could say that he was ever "dead in trespasses and sins" by the Calvinistic definition. It is ridiculous to say that he was totally disinclined to the things of God before his alleged regeneration. How could someone who is dead in sin, by the Calvinistic definition, live such a spiritually minded life? How could he desire so desperately to be reconciled with God if all he possessed was animosity toward God, before his alleged conversion? A smitten conscience, belief in Christ, and careful attendance to "religious duties" is a pretty good start to a biblical assurance of salvation . . . especially for a kid. There was little significant difference in his life after he assumed that he had "closed" with Christ . . . except *feelings* of eternal security. This would reduce the assurance of salvation to a matter of emotion. That is not the biblical formula for assurance. It can be dangerous because feelings come and go. We need strong convictions, which are not dependant entirely upon our emotions. Our feelings are often based on the amount of sleep we had the night before, or how close it is to dinner.

How could Brainerd be so concerned with being reconciled to God if he was so naturally "opposed" to the things of God before his alleged conversion? How does someone dead in sin, by the Calvinistic definition, seek after the only true God the way in which he did . . . *before* he claimed that he trusted Christ? I think the only way he could have been dead in sin, by the Calvinistic definition, is if he was consciously choreographing the whole experience to *appear* pious to those who knew him, or to those who would eventually read about his life. If this were the case, then it would have been done to garner the praise of men.

In order to accommodate their views with our actual experience, some Calvinists will speculate that we could be born again years before we come to faith in Christ. (They may suggest that this is what happened to Brainerd.) This fuels the flames of confusion. One minute they are claiming that regeneration makes a dramatic irresistible change, and the

next minute they claim there may be no saving faith or evident change for years after regeneration. This renders their version of the new birth a perfunctory theory. It gives credence to the “carnal Christian” theory which they typically profess to reject. This is one more reason why I maintain that Calvinism leads to some pretty strange conclusions.

Determined Calvinists must be careful not to substitute a tenacious academic commitment to the 5 points for the biblical recipe of assurance. That is living dangerously. We may end up passively waiting for God to “monergistically” do that which he expects us to do by His common grace. I have known some Calvinists who seem to be resting more in their understanding of the 5 points, for their assurance, than in the biblical formula. Some of them even admit it. Merely agreeing to the doctrine of the final perseverance of the elect does little to identify someone as elect.

The rest of us must be reminded that fruit does not save. Not all the fruit in the world could save one solitary sinner. Jesus saves. We could scrupulously confess every sin that we ever commit, but if Jesus does not go to the cross then no guilty sinner would be saved. Repentance does not redeem . . . the blood of Christ redeems. Salvation is of the Lord. Blessed be His name.

13.6 JONATHAN EDWARDS FUELS THE CONFUSION

You may remember, back in Chapter 6, we looked at Jonathan Edwards’ sermon entitled Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. The following comments in that sermon expose the Calvinistic confusion as it relates to the assurance of salvation.

There is reason to think, that there are many in this congregation now hearing this discourse, that will actually be the subjects of this very misery to all eternity. We know not who they are, or in what seat they sit, or what thoughts they now have.⁹

I understand that Edwards was a visiting preacher on this occasion. This was not his home church and he was not teaching on the assurance of salvation, but this still doesn’t make much sense. What is the reason for his suspicion that “many” in the congregation might be lost . . . or reprobate? How can there be a reason to suspect someone’s faith

is phony, and yet the reason can't be known? It appears that Edwards is suggesting that the saved and lost are indistinguishable from one another, but I don't think he really believes it. He seems to contradict his own views on assurance. Edwards' book The Religious Affections rightly teaches that true saving faith will be evident. On page 348 Edwards says:

It is therefore exceedingly absurd, and even ridiculous, for any to pretend that they have a good heart, while they live a wicked life, or do not bring forth the fruit of universal holiness in their practice. For it is proved in fact that such men do not love God above all.¹⁰

Remember, Edwards was not preaching this famous sermon at a raunchy strip club, a terrorist training camp, or a big city abortion clinic. He is preaching to people at *church*, most of whom would make a profession of faith in Christ. How could they have such control of their outward walk if they were dead in sin by the Calvinistic definition? *Some in the congregation were children.* He is saying that God's anger can be white hot against someone, including children, but there would be no intelligible evidence of the reason for His anger. That may be possible with some secret sins but it can also be very confusing.

It seems reasonable that any hypocrite who heard Edwards preach this sermon would know their own secret sins. They would be aware of the particular sins, which would provoke God's anger, yet Edwards does not bother to name them. Is God angry with them for concealing adultery, idolatry, or murder? Or, is God furious with them for putting too much butter and salt on their popcorn . . . or for skipping a daily devotional? **I would grant that some, like Judas, could look like real believers without actually being one, but Edwards refuses to name any sins (secret or known) which would justify his accusation.** How could Edwards know this about people who he may have never met? It would seem that their very attendance at the meeting would be enough to show that no one in the congregation is dead in sin, according to the typical Calvinistic definition.

I believe it was Vance Havner, who said that it was the preacher's job to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Edwards does not seem to have any interest in comforting anyone in this sermon. If he knows how we might distinguish the true believer from the false, he

does not bother telling anybody in this message. It would be helpful if he explained what he meant by “flying” to Christ. Can we not tell, at all, if someone is a believer or not? It does appear that the hypocrisy of Judas was not entirely evident to the other apostles, but there may have been evidence, which they failed to see. Could Judas, himself, know if he was lost or saved? Edwards’ sermon is frightening in more than one sense. Indeed, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, but it would also be scary to think that we can have no tangible way of enjoying the assurance of our salvation.

How are we to distinguish the forgiven from the unforgiven in any gathering of people? Should we assume that it is completely impossible to differentiate those who *are* in Christ from those who *are not* in Christ . . . but may be assuming that they are? How can we be sure that Edwards, himself, is not in an “unconverted state?” Does he include himself as one who may be 10,000 times more detestable in God’s sight than the most hateful venomous snake is in ours? If not . . . why not? It would be helpful to know how he could be confident that God loves him, and why he is not subject to the fierceness of His wrath. He assumes that some of his hearers are subject to God’s wrath . . . yet for no stated reason other than their *presumed* hypocrisy. How can he assume that they are unbelievers without bringing any evidence of the charge? Unbelief tends to manifest itself in our conversation, thoughts, and conduct. Scripture lists the sins, which are not compatible with a credible assurance of salvation.

If God’s wrath burns the same for a child as it does for a child molester then why bother making any distinctions at all? This is careless preaching, but as we have seen, Edwards is being consistent with his Calvinistic doctrines. Most Calvinists would never dream of being this consistent with their creed. We must give Edwards “kudos” for honestly preaching the Reformed system, but his implications concerning assurance must be questioned. The Bible teaches that we can know if our faith is genuine.

I think it is evident that Calvinism is confusing in many regards. Let’s look, now, at the biblical teaching on assurance. Here we will find a great deal of practical agreement between many Calvinists and non-Calvinists. To be fair, not every Calvinist understands assurance in the same way as expressed by Dr. Sproul, David Brainerd, and Jonathan Edwards.

13.7 HOW DO WE KNOW IF SOMEONE HAS GENUINE FAITH?

This is one of the most important questions in our entire study.

It seems clear that Peter was saved even when he denied knowing Christ three times. On the other hand, it seems that Judas Iscariot was not saved, even though he followed Jesus for 3 years. Judas was *chosen* to be an Apostle and given the power to perform miracles, yet Jesus said it would be better if Judas had never been born. Mk 14:21 That is a sobering statement. We should have no doubt that Judas would have *professed* faith in Jesus, many times. He might have even claimed to love Jesus prior to his betrayal of Him. As mentioned, it was not entirely evident to the other disciples that Judas was an imposter during their days together with Christ. John 13:22

I hope you can see how all this “doctrinal stuff” is really quite practical in our day-to-day lives. If someone who is still dead in trespasses and sins can look so much like a true believer then how can we tell if we have true saving faith? How can we know if we have experienced the “washing of regeneration?”

Both roads in our debate lead to this very important, yet often neglected, topic of assurance. Both sides of our debate agree that the death of Jesus ultimately saves “whoever believes.” Therefore, the big question is “how can I know for sure that I am a sincere believer in Christ?” **If Judas knew that Jesus was both Lord and Christ, but did not have saving faith in Him, then how can we avoid the same fatal mistake?**

For the true Calvinist, this question is moot since there would be no way to avoid the fate of Judas, if you were not elect. Calvinists tend to assume that the reprobate would not care if they were forgiven or not. Thus, in their system, if you really don’t desire to go to hell then you must be born again. If you were reprobate then you, supposedly, wouldn’t even care. This is a necessary assumption in their system. It demonstrates the practical danger of Calvinism. Plenty of unbelievers don’t want to go to hell. There are lukewarm believers who don’t consciously hate God but they should not assume that they are elect.

In terms of our assurance, it doesn’t matter if you believe that the new birth takes place before you believe, after you believe, or while you believe. The proof of the new birth will be a new life . . . in the

spirit. Rom 6, 8. **If we are to reckon ourselves born again, in this life, then we must diligently examine ourselves for the evidence of the new birth that is given in Scripture. We must evaluate the reality of our repentance toward God and our trust in Christ . . . every day.**

It doesn't matter if you are trying to decide if you are one of the "called," in the Calvinistic sense, or if you want to be sure that you are one of the "called", in the non-Calvinistic sense . . . the proofs are basically the same.

We can't see into the heart the way God does and our motives matter in all of this. But it can be hard to be sure of our own motives sometimes . . . let alone know one another's motives. It should make us all glad that we don't have to be the final Judge of all the earth. It is a tough job and a huge responsibility. It is best left with God.

I hope you get the idea, here. The doctrine of salvation by grace, through faith, may be simple but the full assurance of salvation doesn't come easily. We simply can't assume that anyone who claims to love Jesus is really saved. Scripture does not give us that option, but Calvinism would lead us to believe that anyone who claims to love God, or is able to make a profession of faith in Christ, must be born again. Remember, this would be because the reprobate . . .

. . . lack the spiritual ability to appraise spiritual truths.

. . . want nothing to do with the real God, or the gospel.

. . . are only free and capable of resisting the Holy Spirit.

. . . are under the control of a darkened understanding.

. . . are so morally blind that they uniformly prefer evil instead of good.

. . . have no desire for reconciliation with God.

. . . have no pulse, no warmth. They are lifeless with respect to the things of God.

. . . can only will evil concerning their relationship with God.

. . . are blind and stupid concerning the things of God

. . . are deeply anti-God . . . under an unholy necessity to sin . . . totally unable to do good.

. . . do not seek God . . . indeed they cannot seek God because their heart is too corrupt.

The tension and confusion created by the Calvinistic system should be obvious by now. By these definitions, anyone who professes any faith and love for God *must be saved*. It is very hard to imagine that these kinds of people would even want to appear to love God, or believe in Christ. The people described in these statements would not want to attend a church meeting. The so-called “hard” preaching of total depravity may make us sound humble, fearless, and pious but it does lead to some awkward conclusions, especially when we ignore the scope of God’s common grace. We must preach against sin but we must not marginalize the common grace of God.

As you probably know, Jesus warned that there will be those who will call Him “Lord,” at the judgment day, only to hear the words “depart from Me you who practice lawlessness.” Mt. 7:21 Virtually all of the biblical texts which describe the final Judgment Day distinguish between those souls who did good . . . from those who failed to do good. We need to acknowledge this, even at the risk of sounding like Pelagians and Roman Catholics.

So . . . is one BIG sin worth 10 little sins in terms of our assurance? David’s sins were big but we don’t hear too many people questioning his salvation. It is never said in Scripture that David temporarily lost his salvation during the adulterous episode with Bathsheba. Ananias and Sapphira were executed (by God) for lying about how much money they gave to the church. This was after they *sold their home* in order to give money to the church. It certainly appeared that they loved God. Achan took some prohibited spoil from an enemy of Israel (who he was commanded to kill) and Joshua had him executed for it, even though he confessed it. How do we make sense of these situations in terms of the assurance of salvation? Acts 5; Joshua 7

Isn't there some simple formula or foolproof test by which we can know if our faith is sincere?

No. There is no easy formula . . . there isn't supposed to be. Assurance is not designed to come quickly in "1 easy step." Assurance does not "work like magic by just spraying it on." Assurance requires diligence. But diligence is often considered a dirty word, especially in a superficial/fast food/push-button/Cliff note culture like ours.

Nevertheless, we must not think that the assurance of salvation is some kind of impossible dream. We can enjoy a blessed assurance. It has been said that the Roman Catholic Church considered the assurance of salvation to be the great heresy of Protestantism. But the Holy Spirit is real and many of us can read a Bible. The Bible contains some reliable tests by which we can gauge the sincerity of our faith and love. We should be very grateful for the Bible because,

The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Heb 4:12

God's word works like an MRI or X-ray. They expose what is hidden inside the body. The more we study scripture, the more we can discern our own thoughts and intentions. Through the teaching of Scripture, we can more accurately see ourselves as God sees us. We can better discern the sincerity of our faith.

No Christian is morally perfect, so I suppose every Christian might be called a hypocrite. This is not entirely fair since a true Christian is not claiming to be righteous. A true believer is essentially confessing to be *unrighteous* and in need of Christ. Nevertheless, repentance is a necessary component of saving faith and, thus, it is a necessary component of assurance. The grace of God that brings salvation teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts. This saving grace also teaches us to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world. Titus 2:11 Scripture describes certain criterion for leadership in the church, and those qualifications have everything to do with our conduct, as well as our doctrine. A true believer seeks after righteousness in order to be a sweet smelling aroma to God, and to be salt and light in a dark world. We do not repent in order to cut a deal for our salvation. We

should remember the lesson that the Apostle Peter learned through his encounter with Cornelius:

In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.
Acts 10:34-35.

This working of righteousness is done as a result of a faith that works by love. It is not done to atone for sin. **Our obedience confirms our standing in the grace of God . . . it does not cause it.** This is one of the most important distinctions in all of Scripture. So how do we make this essential distinction in our own souls and in the lives of others?

Again, the doctrine of assurance is a place where Calvinism and non-Calvinism tend to merge back together and we all are asking the same basic questions. It doesn't matter if you are trying to find out if you have been irresistibly given faith, in the Calvinistic sense, or if you simply want to know if you have genuine faith in the non-Calvinistic sense. We are all looking for the same evidence. We must consistently examine ourselves to see if we have genuine faith, which works through love.

Perhaps we will never know the specific details of "how" a sinner becomes capable of saving faith. The debate between common grace and irresistible grace may drag on forever. But most agree that we must come to sincere faith in the truth in order to be saved, and to be sure of it. We all agree that Jesus is the Truth. Again, the marks of the spiritual new birth will be the same regardless of when it actually occurs.

13.8 GOD'S PROMISE IS SURE

Here is one more thing we can all be sure of and agree upon: God is not a liar. If He promises salvation to "whoever believes" then "whoever believes" will definitely be saved. They cannot be lost. All the promises of God in Christ are yes, and amen (or sure). 2 Cor 1:20 The ambiguity regarding any sinner's salvation is not found in the integrity of God. The ambiguity will be in the sincerity of our own faith. When Peter's faith began to falter on the water . . . he began to sink. Jesus did not lose His power to keep Peter on top of the water. God had

decreed to exercise His power *according to Peter's faith*. Jesus did not want to keep Peter on top of the water irresistibly. Peter's short walk on the sea wonderfully serves to illustrate salvation and its assurance.

God would be under no obligation to have mercy on any guilty sinner unless He promised that He would. God would not be obliged to extend His mercy to the contrite if He didn't want to. He is not required by His justice to extend His grace to anyone who has deliberately broken His law. As it is, God *must* save the contrite because He has promised that He will, and He cannot lie. We rejoice that God has indeed promised to save every penitent sinner who asks for forgiveness. God has sovereignly decreed to save us by the power of His grace, through our faith. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation . . . to everyone who believes. Rom 1:16

Scripture consistently leads us to the conclusion that saving faith is a true, actual, and independent condition of salvation. It is accomplished by the common grace of God. Faith is not an irresistible consequence of an unconditional election. Our contrite faith is the reason for our election to salvation. If your faith works through love then you are "the called." God has decreed that whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. Whoever believes . . . are the elect. The elect . . . are whoever will believe.

Those who desire God to reveal the specific outcome of our individual final judgment will just have to wait. That information is not available apart from the promise and the witness of the Spirit in our hearts. These will have to be enough. If your faith is genuine then your name will be in the book of life. You can bet your soul on it. (You might even have a new name in the book.)

When Jesus told the thief on the cross that he would soon join Him in paradise, it was an *extraordinary revelation*. The rest of us should not expect such a confirmation of the sincerity of our faith. Jesus' words to the thief were also a blessed encouragement to all believers for the rest of time. They prove that the just shall live by faith alone. The thief was probably never baptized. He probably did not give much money to help the poor. He never went to church. He never spoke in tongues or went forward at a gospel meeting, but Jesus assured him, personally, that he would be in paradise. Thus, we conclude that salvation is by grace alone, and through faith alone. Luke 23:40-43

The rest of us will likely have to wait on the Judgment Day, and bear fruit along the way, if we want to be sure of our forgiveness. Remember again, the lesson of Romans 9 (and John 9): God does not have to do for everyone what He does for some . . . unless He has promised to. He is not obliged to give us the same revelation that He gave the dying thief. God has given His promise of salvation to every one who will repent and have faith. He has also given true believers His Holy Spirit. That will have to be enough for now. Again, God really values our trust in Him and He is exceedingly worthy of it. **God has earned our trust, if by nothing more than witnessing His creation.**

13.9 ASSURANCE IS LIKE COMBUSTION, INVESTING, AND MAKING COOKIES

When we look at the various marks of the new birth, which are taught in Scripture, we see that the recipe for a healthy assurance includes a combination of ingredients. There is not merely one test of true faith. There are several. They work in conjunction and harmony with one another.

As you may recall from science class and camping trips, starting a fire requires more than one necessary condition. You need sufficient oxygen. You need sufficient fuel. You also need sufficient spark. (It helps if it is not pouring down rain.) We need all three of these necessary conditions to produce fire. Having one or two of these conditions is not enough to start and sustain a nice cozy fire. Likewise, if your car engine cannot get enough gas, air, and spark then you aren't going anywhere in it, until it does. The same principle is at work in the biblical doctrines of assurance. It is not enough to profess that you believe in Jesus, or even confess the right doctrine about Jesus. It is not enough to live a relatively moral life. It is not enough to help the poor or attend church regularly. It is not enough to endure sickness, injury, tragedy, or even persecution. We must look for a pattern of all of these traits together . . . not just one or two, occasionally.

Too many professing believers are drawing their entire assurance from one initial profession of faith. This is like putting your entire investment portfolio into one single stock. Wise investors put their money in different places and carefully watch each one for growth. They may buy some stocks *and* some bonds.

They may buy some gold and invest in real estate. We must do the same with our souls.

Likewise, when we set out to make a batch of chocolate chip cookies, we cannot expect the cookies to turn out, if we only mix some flour and some chocolate chips. It is not even enough to bake a mixture of sugar, flour, and chocolate chips. You need to mix *all of the ingredients in the proper proportion* or you will not get good cookies. Inferior ingredients, or ingredients that are not properly measured and mixed, will yield inferior results. The same is true of the biblical assurance of salvation. When certain essential ingredients are left out, our assurance is compromised. If you love one neighbor but hate your other neighbor, it will diminish your assurance. If you attend church, work hard, and give money to charity, but abuse your spouse and kids then your faith is still in doubt.

13.10 FIRST JOHN—THE BIBLICAL RECIPE FOR ASSURANCE

The apostle John gives us a treasure chest of divine instruction regarding the assurance of salvation. It should not be neglected. John tells us plainly, why he wrote this epistle:

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life . . . 1 John 5:13

John's letter lists a number of tests whereby we can know if our faith is genuine. Therefore, we can know that our sins are covered by the blood of Jesus. (Remember, we are asking if the redemption of the cross is *imputed* to our own lives. As we saw in the last chapter, Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, but we still need to have the efficacy of His death permanently applied to our individual account. The redemption of the cross is not applied to unbelievers.) The tests in 1 John are somewhat general in nature, but when they are examined all together they provide a wonderful recipe for assurance. John gives us the birthmarks of the new birth. Thus, we can know if we should reckon ourselves to be born of God. This is a tremendous privilege we enjoy over those who lived before Jesus, and those who have never read a Bible, or heard about Jesus.

Let's examine a short list of the main ingredients in the biblical recipe for a blessed assurance.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. 1 John 1:8-10

In a word, the gospel is about forgiveness. Contrite confession of sin is at the heart of saving faith. It is an essential requirement for salvation itself. Our faith must be humble faith. Contrition is not the only ingredient of a healthy assurance . . . but it is an essential ingredient. It is like the raw eggs in the cookie dough. It permeates and moistens all the other ingredients. Without the eggs, the dough would be a big dry clump and the cookies will not turn out right.

Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith. Hab. 2:4

God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. 1 Pet 5:5

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Mt 5:3

Saving faith is contrite and grateful.

Here is the next ingredient:

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. 1 John 2:3-4

If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him. 1 John 2:29

A practice of obedience to the law of God is not the only ingredient of a healthy assurance . . . but it is an essential ingredient. This is like the butter or shortening that gives shape to the dough. Without the shortening, the dough would have no body. You can't get good cookies

without the shortening. You can't have the assurance of salvation without a practice of obedience to Christ's commands.

If our sin escalates, as professing Christians, then at some point we must stop calling it "the besetting sin of a genuine believer" and begin calling it "trampling under foot the grace of God". Our so-called "faith" could be the fatal presumption of a false believer. Our obedience proves the sincerity of our faith.

Next ingredient:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 1 John 2:15

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world . . . our faith. 1 John 5:4

Enduring the "oven" of this life is essential to proving that our faith works through love. Turning from this temporary world with its lusts and pride is not the only ingredient of a healthy assurance . . . but it is a necessary ingredient. Overcoming the "fiery furnace" of sickness, tragedy, and injustice demonstrates the sincerity of our faith. The life of self pity indicates that "self" is still on the throne. The faith of those who "melt down" or "burn out" under trial is suspect. This might be weak faith, which is genuine, but it could be vain faith. Vain faith is not saving faith.

Remember the patience of Job. He overcame the unjust loss of his possessions, the loss of his loved ones, and the loss of his health. If your faith has survived a serious illness or injury, and you still desire to worship God, then it is a good indication that your faith is genuine. Likewise, if you have survived the loss of loved ones and you still worship and serve God, then it is a good indication that you will keep your faith to the end. This is especially true when the dearly departed was not known to be a believer.

If we fail to overcome trial and persecution then we are like the seed that fell on the stony and thorny ground. It withered away. It did not persevere and bear fruit. Mt 13

Next ingredient:

He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. 1 John 2:9

We know that we have passed from death unto life if we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. 1 John 3:14

Brotherly love is not the only ingredient of a healthy assurance . . . but it is an essential ingredient. The chocolate chips are not the only ingredient in chocolate chip cookies, but without them, you don't have chocolate chip cookies. Paul told the Thessalonians that God, Himself, teaches believers to love one another. 1 Thes 4:9 If you don't love real Christians then you aren't one.

Next ingredient:

He who does not love does not know God for God is love. 1 John 4:8

A life characterized by love is not the only ingredient of a healthy assurance . . . but it is an essential ingredient. Love is the sugar in the cookie dough. Those whose faith works by love are the sweetest of saints. They enjoy the Christian life and they make it more enjoyable for the rest of us. They are not bitter, depressed, judgmental, or otherwise self absorbed because they have personally tasted the love of God. They love God with all of their heart. They love their neighbor as themselves. They even love their enemies. They are not puffed up with pride. Their love is longsuffering and kind. Their love does not envy and it is sacrificial. Their love thinks no evil about others and it does not rejoice in iniquity. It doesn't gossip. 1 Cor 13

When we help the poor and needy, we imitate the love of God. Mt. 25:31-46 When husbands love their wives and make sacrifices for their families they reflect the love that God has for His bride, which is the Church. Eph 5:25-28

If you have been mistreated and abused by people and you have forgiven them, then you have demonstrated a love that is like God's love. He extends his love to sinners who have questioned His integrity,

disrespected His righteous character, and mocked His judgment. He loves the unlovely.

When our faith works by love, we have reached the pinnacle of God's grace in our lives. We are the most useful and we are the most at peace. We are the most ready and willing to die.

The final ingredient:

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God . . . 1 John 5:1

Professing the right doctrine about Jesus is not the only ingredient of a healthy assurance . . . but it is an essential ingredient. Jesus is the word of God. He is the embodiment of truth. Believing the "Truth" is like the flour in the cookies. It is the main staple of the dough. No flour . . . no cookies. If you try making cookies without flour, you get a gooey mess. If you try having faith without truth then you also get a gooey mess. Syncretism cannot work because there is no foundation of absolute truth. Truth is the bedrock on which we place our faith. Syncretism is disbelief with a sugar coating. It is like cotton candy. It may be sweet but it's not fulfilling. There is no substance to it. It is not nourishing. Love without truth is impossible. Love rejoices in the truth. 1 Cor 13:6

The popular old Beatles song "All You Need Is Love" is the philosophy of many today. It makes a nice song but it is too simplistic as a way of life. We must get our loves in the right order to enjoy a reliable assurance. It is possible to be passionately in love with lies and liars. It is not hard to love a god of our own imagination, who always excuses us, gives us our way, and finds fault with those who disagree with us. John 3:19; 12:25, 43; Luke 14:26; Hos 4:18

Those who never hear the message of Jesus Christ will never be able to enjoy the kind of assurance that is available to those who have heard the gospel. Unless the Church gets them the Good News, they will never enjoy the great light of truth that is now available to them. We can see from the list in Hebrews 11, and the lives of other believers, like Cornelius and Nathanael, that it is possible to have sincere faith in the true God without knowing about Jesus. When someone who has this basic faith in the true God hears about Jesus, they will concur that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. This is

the great motive for world evangelism: So that the world may know God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent. John 17:3 When people are exposed to the word of God they can better reflect His character. It is the great purpose of life.

13.11 2 PETER 1:5-11—WHAT MAY BE LACKING IN OUR FAITH?

The apostle Peter also gives us some vital insight that helps us to establish our faith and enjoy a steady and fruitful walk in Christ.

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the next verse, Peter makes the connection between these fruitful components of faith and our assurance.

For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

These are some of the most important and practical words in the entire Bible. We know that everyone who professes faith may not actually have saving faith. In many parts of the world it is not very difficult to say that you love God (or even Jesus), but it takes real commitment to prove it over a lifetime.

When we consider making a big purchase, it is always wise to give the decision its “due diligence.” We check out the product and/or its manufacturer. We weigh the pros and cons. We consider the brand. We look at other options and make comparisons. (My wife would not even consider buying a food item without scrutinizing every single ingredient. I tend to eat first and ask questions later.) Peter is instructing

us to give due diligence in the examination of our own faith. A lot hangs in the balance.

Some people are fooling themselves with a disingenuous profession of faith. Like John, Peter is defining that which constitutes saving faith. When we compare Peter's list of characteristics, which should be added to our faith, we see that it is very similar to the recipe for assurance, which we just saw in 1 John. Paul taught the same things in Galatians 5 when he contrasted the fruit of the Spirit with the fruit of the flesh. He explained that those who walk in the flesh will not inherit the kingdom. Those who really wish to be sure that they are Christ's will crucify the flesh and live in the Spirit. Peter is also agreeing with James when he said that faith without works is dead. Our faith is proven genuine by our works. James 2:14-26 The works themselves do not save.

Peter is also agreeing with Jesus when He said, If you abide [remain/ persevere] in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." John 8:31-32 Peter is not saying that we are justified by virtue, self-control, knowledge, perseverance, godliness, brotherly love, or love. Scripture says that we are justified by faith. The Bible never says that we are cleansed or redeemed from sin by our self-control or virtue. (This is great news for natural born sinners.) We are cleansed by Christ in the "washing of regeneration." John 13:8; Col 2:13; Titus 3:5

Peter is certainly not saying that we can atone for our sins by our godliness, self-control, or perseverance. He is not saying that we are saved by our knowledge or even our love. He is saying that we are saved by our faith; then he describes the kind of faith that saves. This distinction is at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. It is crucial. Saving faith is proven sincere when it includes virtue, self control, knowledge, perseverance, godliness, brotherly love, and love.

Like a good shepherd of the sheep, Peter is protecting us from some common errors. The first error is the assumption that we are justified by the works of the law. The second error would be the assumption that we merely need to *profess* belief in Christ in order to be saved, and sure of it. Peter is also protecting us from another dangerous error. **He is showing that saving faith is not measured best in a moment of time, or in a single "salvation experience."** One single experience in life is not the right way to assess the genuineness of our faith, and

thus the certainty of our new birth. This is a common error among Calvinists and non-Calvinists alike. I believe many Puritans were guilty of this error and it has been exacerbated by many evangelicals to this day. It is simply impossible “do these things” during an altar call or by making a single profession of faith. It takes time to add these components to our faith. If we want to be certain of our union with Christ then we will have to live more and more like Christ.

The Calvinistic view of salvation lends itself to this error. If we assume that saving faith is (essentially) an irresistible gift, which must be delivered to the elect in an instantaneous moment of time, then we circumvent any meaningful perseverance in the faith. Remember, Calvinists would not agree that we begin life in a state of grace. They assume that we begin life “spiritually dead” and under condemnation from birth. They reject the notion that everyone is born with the ability to believe the Truth.

We naturally tend to resist any understanding of assurance that requires much diligence, especially lifelong diligence. We prefer an assurance that comes quickly . . . even immediately. The Puritans surely applied more scrutiny to their professions of faith than we do today, but they still spoke of “closing with Christ.” Many taught that there is a recognizable point in time, which should be looked upon as the moment when we become irreversibly safe in Christ. They looked for a “salvation experience” of dramatic change, even for those who had been raised in the Church, and spoon-fed the gospel.

It can be confusing and frustrating for young people, who have never doubted the gospel from their childhood, to be told that they don’t really believe it, and they need to “get saved.” Instead of being taught that repentance and faith is a way of life, they are told that it is something, which they must do *once* in order to be saved . . . and sure of it. Again, I maintain that this is due in large part to the Calvinistic understanding of “original sin” and their neglect of a potent common grace. The historical Calvinist is teaching that we are not merely born sinners, but we are each born *condemned* sinners, with no ability to believe the gospel truth. They teach that everyone, including the elect, deserves to perish in hell from the moment they are conceived. Somehow, even the elect should believe that God must not love them until they receive the irresistible gift of faith. It can be confusing, especially to kids. This

problem is made worse by teaching that we can't do anything to be saved . . . but we must do something to be saved.

The position of our non-Calvinist is that we are born sinners but we are safe in the grace of God until we knowingly reject the truth, which is written on our hearts and further explained in Scripture. Again, I hope you can see why the study of Bible doctrine is immensely practical.

If you believe that God's fury, and certain damnation in hell, hangs over every single person from the moment they are born, then it will naturally affect your doctrines of salvation and assurance. Likewise, if you believe that God does not desire the salvation of every sinner then it will affect the way you interpret the Bible. It will also affect the way you interpret the invisible hand of Providence in your life. On the other hand, if you believe that God truly desires everyone's salvation, and Jesus died so that every sinner might be saved, then this will inhibit an unhealthy and hyper-dependence upon outward professions of faith. It keeps our focus on our daily walk.

Remember again, Jesus spoke of the faith that is in children. Mk 10:15 We should be concerned with keeping that faith intact, instead of assuming that it does not exist. Paul was alive once without the law. Rom 7:9 Jesus commanded people to *turn back* to childlike faith. Mt 18:3 We all have seen the invisible attributes of God in His creation. His law is written on every heart. The message of the cross confirms that which is in every conscience. It also confirms the moral laws of God, which are revealed in Scripture.

Those Calvinists (and non-Calvinists) who believe that full or infallible assurance can come in a moment of time must reject this text in 2 Peter as untrue. They must assume that we *do not* need to add virtue, knowledge, self-control, and love to our faith in order to be certain of our entrance into heaven. They are carelessly (and necessarily) implying that a sincere profession of faith is all that is needed to be certain of our salvation. I suppose that most Christians who practice altar calls, or otherwise teach "immediate assurance," would be quick to admit that our profession of faith must be sincere to be saving. I would certainly agree, but the sincerity of our faith is best measured over time . . . a lifetime. Insincere professions of faith can look and sound just like sincere ones, but Scripture describes the difference.

We must not conclude that someone's faith is sincere based on one single experience, no matter how dramatic and emotional. We can hope these experiences are genuine but our entire life is the “salvation experience” for believers.

Peter is saying that we cannot be “unfruitful” in the knowledge of Jesus Christ and be sure of our final entrance into the kingdom. We can know the truth about Jesus and profess to believe in Him, but if our faith is barren of these fruits then it is vain faith. 1 Cor 15:2; Gal 3:4; 4:11 It must not be assumed to be sincere. Vain faith does not trust. It is not contrite. It does not work by love. Emotions are great but our profession of love to God must be backed up by our actions. This is why the biblical pictures of the final judgment distinguish between what people did . . . and did not do. It is a function of what they did . . . and did not believe.

Those believers who attend to the needs of the “least of these my brethren” are those who add brotherly love to their faith. Those who do not help “Christ” when He is thirsty, naked, sick, and in prison are those who do not add brotherly love to their faith. Mt 25:31-46 Those professing Christians who avoid the preaching of the gospel and Bible study are those who fail to add knowledge to their faith. Those who continue to over indulge the flesh are those who do not add self-control, virtue, and godliness to their faith. Our habitual actions expose what we love most.

13.12 WHAT IS THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ROLE IN ASSURANCE?

Scripture explains that true believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us that if we do not have the Spirit of Christ then we do not belong to God, in the salvific sense. Rom 8:9 (Everyone belongs to God by virtue of creation.) Acts 17:28 Scripture also says that God has given to believers His Spirit, as the earnest, or down payment, of His heavenly promise. Paul told the Ephesian believers that they were “sealed” by the Holy Spirit of God; however, he mentioned this in the context of a lengthy exhortation to put off lying, stealing, foul language, bitterness, wrath, anger, quarreling, evil speaking, and malice. It is apparent that the Holy Spirit's influence in our lives, as believers, does not automatically result in a perfectly sanctified life. Eph 4:30 It is evident that those who are sealed with (or in) the Spirit . . . still sin.

If the sealing of the Holy Spirit means that there is a point in time where we could not possibly be lost, then it would not necessarily mean we will be aware of it, when it occurs. There is no text in Scripture, which clearly says that when you do “such and such” then you’ll know that you have been irreversibly sealed in the Spirit. In spite of the Spirit’s presence, there will still be plenty of opportunity for believers to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving of one another. If the indwelling and sealing of the Holy Spirit makes it utterly impossible for Christians to stumble in sin, then the Holy Spirit is not in anyone that you and I know. 2 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 1:22

Thus, we see that there are a number of ways to ask the same basic question. “How do we know if our faith is genuine” is the same as asking, “How do we know if we are indwelt with the Spirit?” Likewise, the question, “How do I know if I am among the elect” is the same as asking, “How do I know if I have been born again?” One more way to ask the same question is, “How do I know if I really love God.”

We might be tempted to assume that we would certainly know if we really love someone, but that is much easier said than done. Many unfaithful husbands and wives have claimed to love their mate only to be found cheating on their marriage vows in one way or another. Many parents who would be indignant if you questioned their love for their children will be found neglecting or even abusing them, and sometimes consistently. Most of us would have serious doubts about the love of a father, for his children, if he was ever caught abusing them in private. There is more to loving someone than just talk.

Such is our dilemma with the things of the Spirit. King David did not look like someone who had been supernaturally changed, or sealed, by the indwelling of God’s Spirit during his costly collapse with Uriah and Bathsheba, but he was a genuine believer. The same would be true of some in the Corinthian church. Likewise, Peter did not look like he was “born of the Spirit” when he denied knowing Christ. Some of the believers in Galatia, who had been duped into trusting the law for their justification, did not look like people who had been set free from the law . . . by the Spirit. Gal 3:1 At some point, we must translate the invisible things of the Spirit into our visible practice, or they lose their impact and meaning.

If we are carnally minded, and live according to the flesh, then we should not assume that we have been born of the Spirit, indwelt by

the Spirit, filled with the Spirit, set free by the Spirit, or sealed with the Spirit. We can run around claiming all kinds of spiritual blessings but it will just promote confusion if our conduct contradicts our claims.

Paul often alludes to one of the internal evidences, which proves the Holy Spirit is winning the battle for our minds and hearts. It is the eager anticipation for our life to end, and/or for Christ to return. Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 1:7; 2 Cor 5:2; Phil 1:21 Titus 2:13; Indeed, the true believers' longing for the day when they can put off their corrupt bodies and receive their incorruptible bodies is proof they love God. We may enjoy nice homes here in this life, but they are mud huts compared to the "mansion" in glory. (Unfortunately, it says something about our faith if we never really get excited about seeing Jesus until our health is so bad that we can no longer enjoy our families, our vocation, sex, entertainment, recreation, and eating. Thank God, for sickness and aging . . . they help us keep our perspective.)

13.13 ASSURANCE IS BEST MEASURED IN DEGREES

As noted in Chapter 10, we can glean from Scripture the various characteristics of true saving faith. Therefore, it makes sense that if we examine our hearts and find the evidence of saving faith then we may enjoy some measure of eternal security. The Apostle John wanted our joy to be *full*. 1 John 1:4 This infers that it is possible to experience a joy which is *not so full*. Paul expresses the same idea in Col 2:2 and 1 Thes 1:5. The same term is found in Hebrews 6:11 and 10:22. This is consistent with the testimonies of virtually all believers. **Try as we might to trust the cross completely in times of stumbling and backsliding, we do seem to know, instinctively, that God's grace must not be presumed upon.** We also know it from Scripture. God does not save us so that we may continue living in sin and unbelief. Rom 6:1 There are tipping points (if we can call them such) where our persistence in sin casts a reasonable shadow of doubt upon the sincerity of our repentance and faith.

When our faith is low . . . our joy is also. When our faith is weak, we tend to be depressed, angry, anxious, and we give in to temptation. A sporadic faith yields a sporadic assurance. A strong and tested faith yields a confident and joyful assurance. Sometimes, as in the case of Job, a strong faith can be so severely tested that a believer may get down

and depressed, but still persevere through the trial. Obviously, it would be hard to experience the peace of God, which passes understanding, if we didn't think we were going to be forgiven at the final judgment. Joy and faith go hand in hand . . . as does depression and doubt.

It seems that the most faithful and fruitful Christians will enjoy the greatest joy and assurance. On the other hand, those believers who demonstrate the least evidence of contrite faith, which works by love, will be the most uncertain of their salvation. This is as it should be. **The new (or weak) believer is no less saved than the mature believer is, but the weak believer cannot enjoy the same peace and assurance.** Most of us will be found living somewhere between the “super saints” and the obvious phonies. You may be wondering if there is a blessed assurance for those of us who don’t always live as model Christians. There is . . . but it comes in proportion to our faith and the fruit we bear.

Some sinners should enjoy *no hope* based on their adamant unbelief and/or their overtly sinful lifestyles. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul told the Corinthian church that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God. He said:

Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.

And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Paul is not saying that these sins are unforgivable. Neither is he saying that you can earn eternal life if you manage to avoid these particular sins completely. (When we understand the spiritual nature of the law, it becomes evident that nobody has ever avoided these sins altogether.) Mt 5:21-28 Paul is saying that no one who is living in, and committed to these sinful lifestyles can enjoy the assurance of salvation. Those who don’t confess (and repent of) these sins will not be saved. Their faith, even in Christ, is in vain. Turning from sin is an essential ingredient of assurance. Paul acknowledges that some of the Corinthians had previously practiced these sinful lifestyles. Now they have been

sanctified by the washing of regeneration. They have been justified “by the Spirit of our God.”

If we do not repent of our sins in godly sorrow then we should not expect God to forgive them. Paul himself could not enjoy the assurance of salvation if he was still calling for the death of Christians. On the road to Damascus, Paul received an extraordinary amount of grace and revelation. He testified that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. This infers that he could have disobeyed the call. Acts 26:19 Likewise, Peter could not enjoy the assurance of salvation if he continued denying Jesus. I doubt Peter *felt* eternally secure after the rooster crowed . . . but he was. We know this by the record of Peter’s life after his “sifting.” We could not have known it with certainty during his denials.

Simply put, some people should have no assurance since they demonstrate no evidence of contrite faith. They mock the very idea of an almighty God. They routinely choose to sin and despise the truth, which has been revealed to them. They enjoy sinning and don’t give a rip what God might think, or what He might do to them at the final judgment. They plan on sinning and don’t care whom they hurt in order to satisfy their lust, greed, and inflated egos. They can be saved if they repent, but if they don’t then they will be thrust into the consuming fire of God’s righteous judgment. They spurned the love of God, which is revealed through their conscience, and the Scriptures. Therefore, they will endure “everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord.” 2 Thes 1:9 It won’t be Adam’s fault, and it won’t be because God did not impose upon them the irresistible ability to repent. They will have played a crucial role in their own eternal destiny. Mt 5:29-30; 10:28; Lk 12:5; 16:23

Some people should only have a little assurance since they only bear a little fruit. They profess faith in Christ but they are double minded and tossed to and fro with every old religion or new worldview. Some may be often overcome by their lust, covetousness, and pride. They may attend church but wish they didn’t have to. They are prone to love and trust their money. They esteem the image in the mirror more important than the image of God in their souls. They may love their family or country too much. It is hard to tell whether they love the world more than God . . . or God more than the world. They play the chameleon. They wish that God were OK with small and “necessary”

lies, a little drunkenness, and soft pornography. They profess a hope of heaven but would rather stay young and live forever on earth. At church, they put on a happy face, but in private their faith yields little real joy.

Anyone who professes some faith in Christ may enjoy *some* hope . . . but it might be a false hope. If their life is filled with doubt and sin then they cannot enjoy the same certainty as those who overcome the world by adding virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly love, and love to their faith. 2 Pet 1:5-11

Some sinners may enjoy a sure and blessed hope. Their faith is rock solid. It has been proven sincere through the tests of time. They abandon their false religions and worldviews when they hear the gospel. Or, they may be like Timothy who kept the faith of his childhood, which he learned from a godly mother and grandmother. (We are not told explicitly whether Timothy's mother or grandmother's faith included the knowledge of Christ.) Established believers habitually resist temptation and do not walk in the flesh. They are charitable with their money. They are quick to admit their sins, and turn from them before they become habits and addictions, which dominate and define their lives. They are patient and quick to forgive the sins of others. They love other Christians and enjoy the fellowship of the saints. They are not bitter and disillusioned when tragedy or persecution strikes because they do not hope in this life only. They really believe in the resurrection. They have found that the worship of God is its own reward and the knowledge of God makes everyday worth living.

In short, we are saved when God's grace is extended to us through our faith. Our faith is then proven genuine by our fruit. This grace would not be possible if Jesus did not die for our sins. Where there is no fruit, there can be no true assurance. Where there is some fruit, there will be some assurance. Bountiful fruit yields a joyful confidence and an eager anticipation of the Lord's return. 2 Tim 4:8

God has promised mercy to the penitent. Therefore, it is not wise to dwell on our past sins, but we should not ignore them completely. (This is especially true for those who consider "their past life" to be, that which occurred in the last 15 minutes. It is amazing how quickly sinners want to "put the past behind them" and expect others to act as if their recent trespasses occurred decades ago.) Also, it serves us no great purpose to speculate how we might respond to various

blessings, temptations, and trials someday in the future. We cannot change the past and we cannot know the future, therefore it is useless to fret over either of them. The Apostle Paul often recounted the sins of his past, but we do not get the impression that he was paralyzed by his guilt and shame. He trusted the truths that he preached. He pressed on with confidence. Rom 7:25; Phil 3:12-14 He also stopped persecuting Christians. The best evidence that we will be a sincere believer tomorrow is that we are a sincere believer today. Indeed, right now counts forever.

I have made a conscious effort to limit the use of worn out clichés, until now. There are a couple of good ones, which can be applied to our study of assurance. It is a good thing when the jargon of the street (or country road) accurately teaches biblical truth. I am always a little suspicious of biblical interpretations, which require a PhD to communicate. I suspect you have heard these before:

- 1) The proof of the puddin' is in the eatin'.
- 2) You can't just talk the talk . . . you gotta' walk the walk.

I'm not that fond of pudding so the first cliché has never been one of my favorites. It is a true statement though. One cannot get the true pudding experience by merely reading about it, nor will a picture do it justice. You have to put some of the stuff into your mouth and eat it to get the full experience. This is true of many things including the grace of God. We must taste and see that the Lord is good. Ps 34:8 Salvation is not merely academic theory and neither is assurance. It is not enough to read books on assurance . . . or write them. We have to live it.

13.14 WAS PETER SURE OF HIS SALVATION AFTER THE ROOSTER CROWED?

It is fitting that Peter teaches on the assurance of salvation. As you know, Peter denied Jesus three times after He was arrested. On a previous day, Peter looked like a rock solid disciple of Christ. Mt 16:16 Yet on that night he repeatedly and vehemently denied that he even knew Jesus. You will remember that Jesus predicted Peter's denials.

(Note again, how God could predict the future without irresistibly fixing it. Jesus did not irresistibly predetermine Peter's lies, but He knew they would occur. God *ordained* Peter's denials but He did not *cause* them. John 13:38 God does not lie nor would He make someone lie in order to fulfill His prediction that they would lie.)

In his heart, Peter believed the Truth, but he was afraid to admit it on that particular night. So he lied. Should we believe that Peter possessed an infallible gift of faith? How could an infallible faith be so fearful? This can be a problem for the Calvinist. It is hard to imagine an irresistible and infallible belief in Christ . . . that could deny one's belief in Christ.

Some may philosophically argue that Peter's denials were "determined" by his dominant inclinations at that moment of time. But if that is true then how could he be born of God in the Calvinistic understanding? According to Calvinism, his dominant inclinations as a believer would be toward the truth, righteousness, and faith. It is apparent that our dominant inclinations are not best measured in one event or in one moment of time. **Calvinism has led to the assumption that the decision to follow Jesus must occur in a moment of time instead of over a lifetime. They would reduce saving faith to a momentary decision instead of a lifelong decision.**

Are we to believe that Peter was not capable of standing up for Jesus on the night of His arrest? Peter loved Jesus but his love was not very strong before this "sifting" took place. Luke 22:31 Things got much better for Peter after Jesus rose from the grave. Peter was still capable of denying the Lord but there is no indication in the record of history that he ever did again.

Again, there is no quick and easy answer to the question of assurance. There is not supposed to be. Assurance requires time and diligence for adult sinners. We must not let ourselves be content with an easy assurance. As soon as we demand an easy answer to the question of our assurance, it exposes something amiss in our motive. It sidesteps the main point of life itself. It suggests that we are more concerned with saving our own necks from hell than we are with seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Sometimes parents are so desirous to believe that their young children are saved that they will seize upon any profession of faith and allow it to skew their better judgment. This has a kind of placebo effect

on their fears. They will cling to a spurious hope even when their kids do not bear any fruit of genuine faith. Older kids are often seduced by their parents' blind hope, or they may mock them for it. As we saw in Chapter 7, this needless fear for small children finds its source in the Calvinistic view of original sin, combined with their deficient view of common grace.

Craving the easiest short cut to assurance exposes a faith that does not work by love. Indeed, the true test of any action lies in its motive, and our motives will forever be difficult to gauge perfectly. The great commandment is to love God. It is no coincidence that the greatest proof of saving faith is also love for God, which includes love for His righteousness, Word, and people.

Much of today's evangelism merely instructs people to come forward after a sermon, slip up their hand, or sign the back of a Bible. These things don't require much diligence, and the Apostles instruct us to give diligence to make our calling and election sure. These actions are very easy compared to a lifetime of taking up the cross and staying on the narrow way that leads to life. Mt 7:13-14; 10:38 Paul told the Corinthians to examine themselves to see whether they were in the faith, or not. 2 Cor 13:5 This counsel would be pointless if all they really needed to do was recall their first profession of faith to be sure of their salvation. The same would be true of those Galatians who started out well, but were led astray into legalism.

13.15 THE ALTAR CALL AND ASSURANCE

The altar call and similar methods tend to circumvent the life of faith by replacing it with a single event or momentary decision. Diligence knows no short cuts and this is one of the greatest errors of the evangelical church in my lifetime. Our carnal nature is inclined to superficiality, and this flaw has been watered and fertilized by the Calvinistic doctrines of salvation . . . albeit inadvertently. The error has been exacerbated by misguided and/or manipulative evangelists who may be more concerned with their ministry's reputation than with God's glory and the actual making of disciples. Saving faith is all about trust, and trust takes time to develop. Trust is not an instantaneous or supernatural thing. Neither is love.

One of the problems with many evangelistic methods is that they pressure the sinner into *pretending* they want to know Christ and be like Him, when they really don't. They simply want to stay out of hell. They are looking for a religion that allows them to live comfortably with their sin and still suppress the fear of judgment. The problem, of course, is that the promise of heaven is not made to the impenitent. Salvation is for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . not the pleasures of sin and the pride of life. The biblical salvation is for those who seek first the truth. Therefore, we must preach repentance.

The superficial assurance that has come with the altar call has been a cancerous growth in the modern church. Radical surgery is needed. The mere professions of faith during altar calls, or the signing of a Bible, must be thoroughly removed as a means of *full* assurance of salvation. These methods do not reflect the biblical way of assurance. They offer too much assurance for too little commitment. **Many churches have exchanged the routine practice of the Lord's Supper for the routine altar call, and it has been a bad trade.**

Lukewarm superficiality will reign wherever assurance is presumed to be easy. For what it's worth, I would urge every preacher and every church to quit offering *full* assurance based on a response to an altar call. The best way to do this will be by discontinuing the altar call altogether. In many evangelical churches, the altar call has become a weekly public confessional and/or an opportunity for the regular attendees to be seen as spiritual and pious. We should know better. The level of indifference and turnover in the church is proof that we need to return to the biblical recipe for the assurance of salvation.

When Jesus said that His yoke was easy, He was comparing it to the rigors of the Jewish ceremonial laws, rabbinical traditions, and the impossible task of perfectly keeping the moral law. Mt 11:29 Again, the life of faith is often presented as difficult in Scripture. Faith is likened unto farming, running a race, construction work, and warfare. None of the heroes mentioned in Hebrews 11 are remembered for doing something easy. It is much easier to coax professions of faith out of sinners if you exclude the message of repentance. It is not merely religious pride that would teach the difficulty of saving faith. It is the Scripture.

I am not saying that radical change cannot come to a sinner through an invitation at the end of a gospel presentation. I am not

saying that salvation could not come when a sinner signs and dates the back of a Bible, thereby claiming to be a believer. I have no doubt that many sinners have *started* on the “road that leads to life” through these methods. I am saying that full assurance of salvation cannot come through these methods, and we must quit pretending that it does. It has confused people by the thousands. Starting a race is not the same as finishing it. The Church must pay more attention to the souls who *finish* the race instead of numbering those who start the race . . . or appear to.

In many businesses, there is a common mantra, which says, “More sales will fix everything.” It is shortsighted and eventually this practice rises up and bites. Pastors must not operate their churches by this principle. They are to be shepherds of the flock first . . . and evangelists second. If your pastor feeds the sheep properly then they will bring more sheep to feed.

One of my favorite sports stories is the story of John Stephen Akhwari. You may have already heard it. John had traveled all the way from Tanzania to run in the marathon at the Mexico City Olympics in 1968. The story is told of how he limped into the stadium over an hour after the gold medal, in his race, had already been awarded. His leg was bloody and bandaged. Only a few spectators remained in the stadium. But he pressed on alone. As he crossed the finish line, the small crowd roared out its appreciation. Afterward, a reporter asked the runner why he had not retired from the race, since he had no chance of winning. He seemed confused by the question. Finally, he answered: “My country did not send me to Mexico City to start the race. They sent me to finish.”

This is a wonderful parallel of our spiritual race of faith. It is not merely about starting the race, and it is not about beating other competitors. It is about finishing. Finishing is winning. Faithfulness is success in the kingdom of God.

I certainly am not the first person who has objected to these easy shortcuts to full assurance. Some Bible teachers have been pointing this out for years, and to their credit, many of them have been Calvinists. They may wrongly insist that salvation is irresistible but many “Calvinists” have never taught that full assurance comes in a moment of time. We must not assume that the wonderful emotion, which often accompanies a contrite profession of faith, is an infallible

sign of eternal security in Christ. There will likely be souls in hell that went forward at gospel meetings, with great emotion, only to abandon their faith in a few months or years. This is what the Parable of the Sower is all about.

13.16 CAN SOMEONE WHO HAS BELIEVED THE GOSPEL END UP IN HELL?

I promised that we would tackle this question, so let's give it a shot in light of all we have covered up to now. This same basic question can be put another way: Can believers in Christ lose their salvation? This million-dollar question has been the most visible dividing line between Calvinism and historical Arminianism in the context of assurance.

The historic Arminian says, "Yes, of course, genuine believers can lose their salvation. They can abandon their faith and faith is the condition of salvation. Scripture is full of warnings to believers about leaving the faith and falling away." Judas and (perhaps) Demas would be cited as examples of those who fell away.

But as we have seen, the historic Calvinist says, "Absolutely not. Genuine believers would never be permitted to fall away and lose their salvation. God chose the elect to be saved. He irresistibly gave them their faith, and He will irresistibly assure that they keep their faith. Nobody for whom Jesus died could be lost." Their motto is "once saved . . . always saved." (Note: There may be a large number of believers, who suspect there must be another option besides these two, but they have trouble articulating it.)

Scripture does speak to this question and we will look at some of the biblical texts that affect our understanding of "eternal security." A thorough study of this whole subject could be an entire book by itself. (And this book is big enough.) There are certainly some texts of Scripture, which would seem to teach that those who are really believers . . . couldn't be lost. But there are other texts which teach the real possibility of starting the race and not finishing it. There are examples in the Bible of people who appeared, in most every way, to be genuine believers (even in Jesus) who fell away and were lost. You may have personally known some people who have left the faith, either in practice and/or in profession.

I have already tipped my hand as to what I believe is the biblical answer to this question, at least in one context. As previously noted, if every infant is considered to be in a state of grace during childhood, then anyone who ends up in hell will have ultimately fallen from that state of grace. This state of grace could be temporary. I believe Scripture teaches that God extends His grace to babies and the mentally handicapped, but every sane adult must die as a believer or they will perish. Both sides of our debate agree that adults will either die in faith or die in their sins.

It does seem evident that fairly young children can have a real trust in God, even though they may not understand all the implications of Adam's fall, the deity of Christ, and His death and resurrection. (Who does, completely?) The basic elements of saving faith are not so complex that a child could not sincerely believe them. This is why Jesus used the faith of children as an example for adults *before* He died on the cross. The basic message of humble trust in the true God is not overly complicated. Mk 10:13-16 This helps explain how God could desire everyone's salvation, but sovereignly refuse to impose His mercy on impenitent adults. He did the same thing with Adam. God told Adam not to eat from the tree but He did not prevent him from eating from the tree. Anyone who matures into adulthood and permanently rejects the truth, which is written on their hearts, and in Scripture, will die in their sins. The guilt of their sin will be imputed to them and they will fall from their original state of grace.

But the question still remains: Can an adult believer fall away from the faith and end up in misery? Would God declare someone justified by their faith and then declare them unjustified if they leave the faith? It could be that God does not want to give us an explicitly clear answer to this question. He may have deliberately left some ambiguity (or mystery) here in order to inhibit both a dangerous presumption and unnecessary fear. Let's look at a few texts that speak to both sides of this issue. **We will see that there is a very clear theme of warning in Scripture to all believers.**

We know that false believers are a biblical reality. Paul named them among the "perils" that he endured as an apostle. 2 Cor 11:26 He used the same term [psyoo dad' el fos] when describing those who came into the Galatian churches in order to spy out their freedom in Christ. They were looking to bring Christians under the bondage of the law.

Gal 2:4 He is not saying that they were genuine brethren who merely taught a false doctrine by mistake. He calls them *false brethren*.

As we take a brief look at the following texts, let's stick close to our rule of interpretation, and try to distinguish between what is explicitly clear in the texts, and what could be implied in the texts.

Jesus told the parable of the Sower in which some of the seeds germinated but did not survive and bear fruit. Mt 13

Jesus told the Jews who believed Him, “If you abide/remain in My word, you are My disciples indeed.” John 8:31 He infers that it is possible to fail to remain in His word.

Jesus told the parable of the unforgiving servant. The man enjoyed a place of forgiveness, but then lost it when he refused to forgive a fellow servant. Mt 18:21-35

Jesus told the parable of the Ten Virgins. They all slept while waiting for the bridegroom to return. Five of them did not have enough oil for their lamps, in spite of the fact that oil was available. Thus, they were shut out of the wedding. Mt 25:1-13

When Jesus spoke of His return and/or a coming judgment, He said, “And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved.” Mt 24:12-13

Paul used Old Testament examples of the Jews, who failed in various trials, to warn the Corinthians of falling into idolatry. He said, “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” 1 Cor 10:12

He then went on to explain to the Corinthians that they *were* saved by the gospel, *if* they hold fast that word which he preached to them, unless they believed in vain. 1 Cor 15:2 Paul is saying that they are now saved . . . unless their faith is not genuine.

Likewise, in writing to the Colossians, Paul said that Jesus had reconciled them to God *if* indeed they continued in the faith, grounded and

steadfast, and were not moved away from the hope of the gospel. The implication is quite clear. If they don't continue in the faith then they must not assume that they have been reconciled to God. Col 1:20-23

Paul told the Gentiles in the Roman church: "Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches [Jews], He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, *if* you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off." Rom 11:21-22

We have already seen Peter's exhortation to be diligent in adding virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love to our faith. He said, '*If* you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.' 2 Pet 1:10-11 The implication is that if our faith does not produce these things then an entrance into the kingdom will not be supplied. Another implication is that they are not fully in the kingdom yet. There is more to come in terms of seeing and entering the kingdom.

The writer of Hebrews begins the epistle by explaining that God has now spoken to us by His Son. This revelation is superior to the revelation of angels. Hebrews 2:2 then says,

Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him . . . ?

This suggests that it is possible to "drift away" and "neglect" the word (even The Word, which became flesh and dwelt among us). It also initiates a theme, which runs through the entire epistle to the Hebrews. The theme is one of warning against falling away.

Hebrews 3:12-14 says, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today’, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers *if* we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end . . .”

In Hebrews 4:11, the writer reminds his readers that the Jews’ exodus into the Promised Land was not the only “rest” for the people of God. The hard work is not over. They still must be diligent to enter the final rest of heaven, which is the New Jerusalem. He says, “Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.”

Much has been made of Hebrews 6. It is a difficult text to understand, especially for the Calvinist who holds to the company line on their definition of “dead in sin.” The people described here have been given a lot more than *common* grace. They have been given *extraordinary* grace and it seems that they could still end up lost. Once again, it is hard to reconcile another biblical description of the unsaved with the Calvinistic definition of “spiritually dead.”

Hebrews 6:4-6 says,

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

I will not take the time here for a lengthy attempt to explain this text, but I do want you to see how it fits into this theme of warning to *Christian* believers. If this type of falling away were not possible then there would be no need to put it in the Scripture. This may be describing what happened to Judas Iscariot, and others, who were given extraordinary grace . . . only to harden their hearts and reject the truth. These texts may not explicitly teach that someone can be saved and then lost, but they, at least, teach that someone can appear, in most every way, to be saved . . . but not be. They also teach the *continual*

nature of repentance. We must not rely, entirely, on an altar call (or baptism) experience for our hope.

When I was a Calvinist, I could never reconcile this kind of person with my understanding of “dead in trespasses and sins.” “Tasting” the heavenly gift and the good word of God would be impossible for those who are dead in sin, by the Calvinistic definition. A person who is “spiritually dead,” by their definition, could not taste anything spiritual. The people described here may be dead in sin (that is unforgiven) but they have tasted spiritual things. They have been enlightened in the context of the Son of God. Therefore, I hope you have come to question the veracity of the Calvinistic definition of “dead in trespasses and sins.” It simply can’t be what the Calvinist claims that it is. Something is missing from their conclusions. It is the scope and influence of God’s common grace.

In Hebrews 10 we find more exhortations to “draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith”, and “to hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.” Heb 10:22-23 If drifting away and wavering were not possible then these commands would be perfunctory. Note also, that the assurance of salvation is really a *command* to be obeyed. God does not want us to live in fear and be unsure of our salvation. His love has come to cast out our fear. 1 John 4:18 The term “true heart” is key to understanding the question of falling away.

All these warnings and exhortations lead up to a key text. We have been alluding to this text, and the principle contained within it, throughout our study. The principle is this:

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation, which will devour the adversaries. Heb 10:26-27

The writer then goes on to draw another comparison between the Old Testament experience of the Jews and the New Testament gospel. All this warning is especially applicable to those “Hebrews” who had received much more grace than the average Gentile at that time. The

Jews had been given much; therefore, much was expected of them. He compares those who rejected Moses' law to those who have trampled under foot the Son of God and esteemed the blood of Christ a common thing. They have insulted the Spirit of grace. Sinning against the knowledge of Christ is even worse than sinning against the Law of Moses. Indeed, Jonathan Edwards was right about this: it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, especially if you have mocked His only begotten Son . . . without remorse. Heb 10:31

We saw this same principle of sinning against knowledge in Romans 1 and 2. Those who have suppressed the invisible attributes of God that are seen in nature, and have ignored the law written on their hearts, will be without excuse. The sacrifice of Christ will not be imputed to them . . . unless they repent in true contrition.

We can see how this principle works in the lives of children. As they mature, they will be held increasingly accountable for the knowledge of God, which has been revealed to them. We see that God has been very patient in overlooking sins committed in ignorance, but now those who hear the gospel, and reject it, will not be saved. Jesus offered no hope for those who knew who He was, but refused to trust Him. They will swallow their pride or there will no longer be a sacrifice for their sins. The efficacy of the cross will not be imputed to their account.

This “willful” sinning should not always be equated with the everyday struggle, which every believer has with our natural lust, covetousness, and pride. This “willful sin” is a permanent refusal to trust and obey the truth, in the face of undeniable evidence. It is a bold denial of the truth even when our hearts bear witness to the truth. It is pure pride and it results in impenitent and habitual sin. This is sinning without caring what God says about it, or what He might do about it. This is coming to the knowledge of the truth . . . and spitting on it.

It must be admitted that our sin as Christian believers is often committed with forethought. It is deliberate. We know better, but temptation sometimes gets the best of us. It is like Peter when he denied knowing Christ, David with Bathsheba, and Paul in Romans 7. The difference is the “godly sorrow” in the contrite and the “worldly sorrow” of the hypocrite. 2 Cor 7:8-10 The true believer knows that God's commandments are right. In keeping them, there is great reward. Hypocrites wish that the law would just go away and leave them alone. Indeed, the true test of any action lies in its motive.

We should note that in all of these warnings Scripture never uses the explicit language of “losing your salvation.” Scripture never says that anyone became “unborn again”, but it does describe a falling away or failure to finish in faith.

So, could someone who has sincerely believed the gospel end up in hell? Again, the Calvinist says, “No way, that’s impossible. Sincere faith is only given to the elect; their faith will be irresistibly sustained. God is in control of their faith.” The historic Arminian says, “Yes, believers can abandon our faith, and faith is a necessary condition of salvation; therefore salvation can be lost. God sovereignly *refuses* to be in control of our faith.” Further, many Arminians would also say that saving faith can be *regained* after it is lost, however that would be virtually impossible to prove from Scripture. The rest of us are still waffling around somewhere between those two opinions.

13.17 IS THERE A POINT OF IRREVOCABLE ETERNAL SECURITY?

And if there is such a point in time . . . can we know it? This is a question about time, which would involve God’s eternal knowledge; therefore, it will be very difficult to answer. Nevertheless, inquiring minds want to know: Is there a point in time where the believing sinner can no longer be in danger of going to hell? Could there be a point of happy no return, if you will? It would be a point in time, before the final judgment, where true believers are as good as in heaven. Many evangelical Protestants would agree that such a point would exist . . . *at least in the mind of God*. Most Calvinists would say that this actually occurs in the eternal mind of God when He chose the elect to be saved. This still doesn’t do us much good, here on earth, if God does not reveal this information to us in a coherent way.

We have seen that there are multiple scriptural warnings to Christians about continuing in the faith . . . or else. The implication of these texts would seem to be obvious and inescapable. We need to *keep* the faith if we really want to be sure of our salvation.

If keeping the faith is inevitable for the elect, and thus a moot point, as Calvinism necessarily implies, then Jesus and the biblical writers have spent a lot of time and ink emphasizing a moot point. If faith cannot be lost then why would the biblical writers offer so many

warnings of something that could not possibly happen? The sizeable list of biblical exhortations to keep the faith would suggest that God does not immediately seal the fate of those who make professions. If God instantly imputes the righteousness of Christ to our account, at a point in time, then it seems apparent that He does not divulge that information immediately. Many who have professed the biblical Christ with great emotion and apparent confidence have drifted into indifference within a few short years. Some actually become openly hostile to the orthodox faith they once passionately professed. (Note: There's not much difference between hostility to Jesus and indifference to Jesus.) Mt 12:30

On the other hand, there is nothing in the Bible, which explicitly teaches that someone was justified by faith and then became *unjustified* by unbelief. **There are no people in the Bible, including Judas and Demas, of whom it is said, “He lost his salvation,” or “She used to be saved.” We never read of anyone who was saved multiple times.** There are some folks, on the Arminian side, who believe that if the last thing they do before they die were a sin, then they would go to hell, in spite of the fact that they have believed the gospel for decades. This exposes their system of salvation by obedience. We read of no one in the Bible of whom it is said, “they *used to be* born again.” This is not the language of Scripture but some Arminians do imply it from Scripture.

It does make one pause and wonder if Scripture really gives us what we are looking for in terms of the personal knowledge of our own eternal security. As we have seen before, the best answer to our dilemma may lie in the nature of genuine faith. Both sides of our debate agree that false brethren exist. Both sides agree that vain, spurious, or insincere faith is quite possible, and it is not saving faith. Both agree that vain faith can look a lot like genuine faith.

13.18 VAIN FAITH OR GENUINE FAITH?

It is certainly possible to make a profession of faith that is not sincere. As I see it, this distinction holds the best answer to our question about falling away and apostasy. Many have professed faith in Christ to placate a parent, appease a girlfriend/boyfriend, or get their spouse off their back. Some will profess faith in order to join a church. They may

want to impress their boss or provide their kids with some “decent” friends and a little religion. Some profess faith out of sheer fear of hell, but their faith does not work by love. Instead, they are hoping to be forgiven of sins that they have no intention of stopping . . . or even trying to stop. Their profession of faith is a blatant case of CYA . . . if you know what I mean. This is vain faith and we can certainly fall away from vain faith. We also know that vain faith *can last* to the final judgment. This makes it extremely dangerous. Jesus warned that there would be people who are stunned to find out, at the Judgment Day, that their faith was not saving faith. Mt 7:21-23

Remember, Paul told the Corinthians that they *were saved* by the gospel . . . if they had not believed in vain. Similarly, he told the Colossians that they *were reconciled* to God . . . if they continued in the faith. In the parable of the Sower, the plants, which sprung up from the stony and thorny ground, would have looked the same as the plants, which sprung up, in the good soil . . . at first. It was the passage of time and the bearing of fruit that distinguished sincere faith from vain faith. **It is impossible to fall away from genuine faith in Christ but it is quite possible to fall away from vain faith in Christ.**

Let’s keep our balance and list a few Scriptures, which show the blessed assurance that is available to those who are like a tree planted by the rivers of living water. They shall not be moved. Ps 1

Jesus said,

My sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand. John 10:27-29

This is of great comfort and encouragement. We get the picture of a little lamb in the strong arms of the Shepherd. No thief or predator will have any chance of taking the sheep from Him. He is too strong and He is utterly committed to protecting His *genuine* sheep. It would run contrary to the spirit of this teaching to suggest, as some Arminians have, that Jesus would protect against all outside threats but He would allow genuine sheep, themselves, to wrestle free from Him, and run

away to their everlasting destruction. The picture we get is that true believers are indeed safe in the “everlasting arms.” **Genuine believers never try to get away from Jesus because they are genuine believers.** Those who believe in vain are not kept in the Shepherd’s care. They never really liked the Shepherd. He does not protect them because He knows they are not His sheep.

Here, we must note the difference of perspective. God *knows* who the real sheep are. There is no doubt in His mind. He sees the secrets of our hearts. God may not need the passing of time to know whose faith is sincere. But from our perspective the sheep are known by hearing and following Christ. Our “following” is obviously not infallible. It takes time to follow Christ. Following Jesus is not done *once* at the end of a gospel meeting. We may *begin* following Him at an altar call, but we can’t enjoy the assurance of salvation if we only follow Christ for a few years, or bear no real fruit for many years. Thus, he that endures to the end shall be saved. Mt 10:22

Again, we must acknowledge this: unless God explicitly tells us when our washing and imputation actually occurs in our own lives, we will not know it. The knowledge of our own eternal security will not be infallible. Our assurance can be “full” but not infallible. Assurance is a function of our faith in God’s merciful provision, and our faith will be proven genuine, over time, by our works. James 2:14-26

As we have seen, the book of Hebrews contains many warnings against falling away. Yet, we also read in Hebrews,

I will never leave you nor forsake you. Heb 13:5

Scripture teaches that true believers . . .

. . . Are trusting the promises of God, who cannot lie. Titus 1:2

. . . Are complete, accepted, and forgiven in Christ. Col 2:10; Eph 1:6, 7

. . . Are under no condemnation in Christ. Rom 8:1

. . . Have the earnest/down payment of the Spirit. 2 Cor 5:5

. . . Are raised and seated in the heavenly places in Christ. Eph 2:6

. . . May be confident that He who has begun a good work in them will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. Phil 1:6

. . . Have been given all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called them by glory and virtue, by which they have been given exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these they may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption which is in the world through lust. 2 Peter 1:3-4

Real believers have everlasting life in Christ. John 3:36

All of these promises apply to the genuine believer. None of them applies to the vain, superficial, and spurious believer. There are many texts of Scripture, which are of great comfort to the true believer, but they do not specifically *identify* those true believers. The promise that all genuine believers will finish their race in faith does not afford me any personal assurance if I quit running. Simply insisting that my faith is genuine does not mean that it is. This is the big question in the context of assurance. The question is not whether God will keep every one of His promises to “whoever believes.” The question is, “Am I a true believer.” The gospel promises don’t apply to those who have vain faith.

Part of the brilliance of The Pilgrims Progress is the way Christian’s faith and assurance grew as he progressed. His stumbles, recoveries, and victories served to strengthen his resolve. Thus, he kept pressing on. He grew more and more confident with each experience throughout his incredible journey. We often begin the life of faith, like Peter on the water, when he cried out “Lord save me!” But we may finish by saying, “I know that my Redeemer lives” and “Though He slay me yet will I trust in Him.” Mt 14:30; Job 13:15; 19:25

Faith says, “Lord I believe . . . help my unbelief”. Assurance says, “I know whom I have believed.” “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith and there is a crown laid up for me.” Mk 9:24; 2 Tim 1:12; 4:7-8 This is not presumption. It is faith and it pleases God.

If we want the highest possible confirmation that our faith is sincere then we will want to become closely acquainted with the word

of God; especially those places like 1 John and 2 Peter 1. They explain God's instructions on how to be sure that we are forgiven, and thus born again. The beatitudes provide a wonderful description of the faith, which works by love. Anyone with a faith, which works by love, is born of God. Thus, the best answer to the question of falling away lies in the nature of true saving faith, and God's sovereign imputation of Christ's atonement to our account. **Genuine faith cannot be lost because it is genuine faith. This saving faith is not merely done once in a moment but it is done once in a lifetime.**

Those who fail to continue in faith, or drift away, or run out of oil, or draw back, or are moved away, or are cut off, or fall away . . . are those whose faith was vain. Their professed faith was superficial, ill motivated, and insincere. They would be among those who sin willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth. If they never truly repent then there would no longer be a viable sacrifice for their sins. The atonement of Christ would not be imputed to their account. Heb 10:26-31 If their faith was genuine, then they would have brought forth some viable fruit and their faith would endure to the end.

True believers may *backslide* . . . but they do not *apostatize*. It can be hard to differentiate the backslider from the apostate because they can look so much alike. The backsliders will be truly sorry for their sins. Apostates are never really sorry. There may be many in hell who "planned" to repent after they "do their own thing" for a while, but they never got around to it. They got too comfortable in their selfishness and hardness of heart. Their faith in Christ was in vain.

If your faith is like that of the unforgiving servant then your faith is not saving. If we can't forgive others then we must not expect God to forgive us. The grace we enjoy as children can run out. If your faith is like the Pharisees who looked great in public, but were full of all kinds of secret sin in private, then you should not assume that your faith is saving faith. If your faith is like the Galatians, who may have abandoned the cross for the law, then your assurance is in doubt. If, like the rich young ruler, you are consumed with self-righteousness and covetousness then you must not assume that you are saved. If your faith is like those in Corinth who tried to strike up a compromise with fornication, drunkenness, and homosexuality then you have a false hope. We are saved *from* our sins. We are not saved so that we might continue to enjoy them shamelessly. If you have heard the true gospel

but don't accept the substitutionary atonement and resurrection of Christ, then your faith would be in vain.

Vain faith struggles to endure for a lifetime. It will yield to the various lusts and trials which war against the soul. This might be like Paul's former companion, Demas, who loved this present world and bailed out on Paul. Demas may have been a pastor, Sunday school teacher, or Bible study leader before he fizzled out. 2 Tim 4:10 Vain faith will be drawn away to false teachings which oppose the deity of Christ and the simple gospel of the cross. Vain faith will fall into bitterness and despair when faced with the trials and tragedies of life. Real faith may stumble, but it gets back up and presses on.

I believe the theory of "instant" and "infallible" eternal security coupled with our modern evangelistic methods will prove to be a deadly mixture. I would like to be wrong about this but I have a nagging fear that many who show up at judgment may be sent to their doom because they assumed that going forward at an altar call was sufficient proof of saving faith. They were told for years that it was "all they needed to do." They were told that being saved was easy. Some were even told that they didn't have to do anything . . . the Shepherd would do everything for them.

If you forget everything that you may have read in this book, please remember this: We must never teach that saving faith is easy. It is not true. It will confuse people and it could be devastating to their faith.

Don't try to tell your children that the Christian life is easy. They will know better because they live with you, and they will observe the life of others in your church. It was not easy for the Godhead to save us, and it is not easy for sinners to continuously repent and trust God. It runs against our carnal nature. The power of our flesh is formidable and the Devil does not give up souls without a fight.

If saving faith were an irresistible gift then why would it be likened unto farming, running a race, building a house, and warfare? That which is irresistible would not be difficult. **One of the most perplexing things for a Calvinist to explain is how saving faith can be irresistible, yet difficult.** This is a fundamental flaw in the Calvinistic system. By teaching that faith is an irresistible gift, which

is given, monergistically, they essentially remove the elements of contrition, repentance, trust, love, and perseverance in the sinner's faith. Jesus said the road that leads to life is difficult. He said we must labor for the meat that endures to everlasting life. Scripture teaches that we must fight the good fight of faith. We must work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. Jesus does not do all this for us. Calvinism insists that we must passively wait on God to regenerate us and give us the gift of faith. They insist that sinners do not draw near to God; God must drag them to Himself.

I, for one, am done with Calvinism. Grace does not need to be irresistible to be amazing.

The Puritan expression of "closing with Christ" presumes that we can see from God's inerrant perspective. This concept has led many to go beyond a reasonable assurance into a dangerous presumption. This infallible view of assurance becomes a very serious problem when it is adopted by unscrupulous or misguided (but well-meaning) evangelists. They suppose the only due diligence that is needed to be sure of our salvation is to raise our hand, come forward during an altar call, and repeat a prayer after one of their sermons. Likewise, it does not require genuine faith, in most settings, to sign the back of a Bible, thus claiming to be a believer. These professions of faith could certainly be the beginning of our pilgrimage to the Celestial City, but we must never assume that they are the finish line. We can be the most sure of "closing with Christ" when we hit the finish line of life and die in faith. In the meantime,

"... let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith . . ." Heb 12:1-2

As our faith is increasingly established through obedience, sound doctrine, good works, and perseverance through trials, we may enjoy a full and blessed assurance along the way. Life in God is indeed an abundant life. If God's promise is trustworthy and your faith is sincere then you have been saved from sin's penalty. You are being saved from sin's power and you will be saved at the final judgment from the very presence of sin. It may not take a strong and dynamic faith to be saved, but our faith must be proven genuine if we want to enjoy the

full assurance of our final glorification in Christ. We don't need to be famous . . . just faithful.

13.19 FINALLY

God has designed the plan of salvation so that the established believer may enjoy the full assurance of salvation and the peace of God, which passes understanding. There is also hope for the weak and struggling believer whose faith is contrite. But there is no hope offered to the lukewarm, impenitent, or proud. Their faith is in vain. Our faith must work through love. This kind of faith is beautifully described by Jesus when He said:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.

Salvation has an independent human condition, which may be met by any sinner, through the common grace of God. The nature of this condition assures that boasting is excluded. If we are proud of our faith then we have the wrong kind.

Last question: Who gets to spend eternity with God?

Answer:

For thus says the High and Lofty One
Who inhabits eternity,
Whose name is Holy;
“I dwell in the high and lofty place,
With him who has a contrite and humble spirit,
To revive the spirit of the humble,
And to revive the heart of the contrite . . .” Isaiah 57:15

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