



# A grace worth saving: God's sovereignty and human responsibility

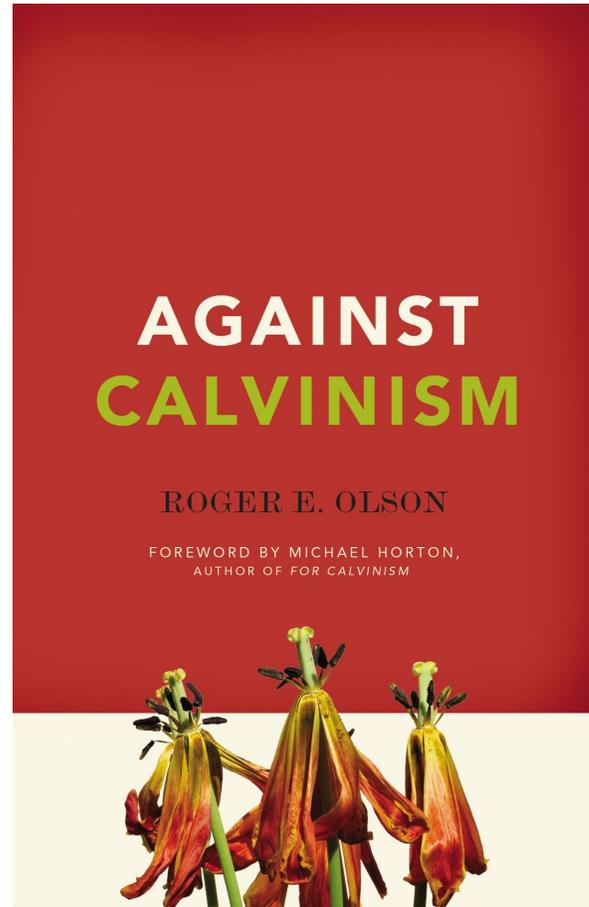
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The Historic Faith  
Lecture 5

# A few takeaways from last time

When we honor the context of Romans 9-11 we see:

- The driving question is, "Since most of Israel has rejected its Messiah, how do we make sense of God's promises in the Old Testament?"
- Romans 9 gives us the answer to this question using concepts like:
  - Corporate dimensions of election to service
  - Remnant
  - Those who oppose God's people will be cursed
  - Judicial hardening
  - God's showing mercy and hardening in order to accomplish the greater redemption of the world
- A Jewish interlocutor (the same as Romans 3), not an Arminian interlocutor
- The climatic application of the olive tree is about conditional salvation
- The passage is simply not about unconditional salvation / damnation as the Calvinists steadfastly claim

# An excellent book that I recommend reading



# What Calvinists are trying to do for God

With unconditional election, I understand their motive. They feel that any human involvement somehow diminishes God's credit or glory.

This is called monergism.

But in their zeal to give God 100% credit, they inadvertently give God 100% blame as well.

The problem is that it seemingly makes God the author of sin.

Calvinists simply cry "mystery" at this dilemma or "Who are you to talk back to God?" Every Calvinist from John Calvin to John Piper answers the criticism in the same way.

# This obsession with 100% credit is more philosophical than actual

What if someone writes you check for \$1 million dollars, would anyone boast that they earned that money because they deposited it at the bank?

Austin Fischer:

Or by means of the classic analogy, salvation is a gift but a gift still has to be received. And what sort of idiot receives a gift and then starts boasting about how he used the muscles in his vocal chords, tongue, and mouth to say, "Yes, I will accept this gift"?

# Sovereignty (determinism) is at the center of Calvinism

In Calvinism, God foreordains and “renders certain” absolutely everything.

John Calvin: “No wind every arises or increases except by God’s express command.”

Elsewhere he writes, “To sum up, since God’s will is said to be the cause of all things, I have made his providence the determinative principle for all human plans and works, not only in order to display its force in the elect, who are ruled by the Holy Spirit, but also to compel the reprobate to obedience.”

Calvin has a section in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* where he argues that God does not merely “permit” evil, he ordains it. (See Book I, pp. 228-231 and Book III, pp. 955-957)

In another book called *The Eternal Predestination of God*, Calvin writes “From this it is easy to conclude how foolish and frail is the support of divine justice afforded by the suggestion that evils come to be not by [God’s] will, but merely by his permission. Of course, so far as they are evils, which men perpetrate with their evil mind, as I shall show in greater detail shortly, I admit that they are not pleasing to God. But it is a quite frivolous refuge to say that God permits them, when Scripture shows Him not only willing but the author of them.”

The God of Calvin is omnicausal and unconditional.

# Sovereignty (determinism) is at the center of Calvinism

Paul Helm's book *The Providence of God*:

"Not only is every atom and molecule, every thought and desire, kept in being by God, but every twist and turn of each of these is under the direct control of God."

"For, according to the "no-risk" view, God controls all events and yet issues moral commands which are disobeyed in some of the very events which he controls. For example, he commands men and women to love their neighbors while at the same time ordaining actions which are malicious or hateful."

Lorraine Boettner:

God "very obviously predetermined every event which would happen" so that "even the sinful acts of men are included in his plan"

"God has a definite purpose in the permission of every individual sin, having ordained it 'for His own glory.' "

John Piper (writes an article on Sept 17, 2001) saying that God did not merely permit or is using September 11, but caused it. In another sermon in 2005, he said, "Even a 'dirty bomb' that levels Minneapolis would be from God."

# How might we respond to this scripturally?

James 1:

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. 14 But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. 15 Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. 16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. 17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

Austin Fischer:

Looking for free will in the Bible is like looking for gravity: it's assumed everywhere and holds everything together, so you probably won't notice it until it's missing and you float away. This is why it's usually easier to rattle off multiple verses that seem to contradict free will than it is to name a single verse that affirms it.

David Bentley Hart:

Refers Calvinistic sovereignty as "theological fatalism" and that its adherents "defame the love and goodness of God out of a servile and unhealthy fascination with his "dread sovereignty."

# If God has decreed all things, what about human freedom?

BB Warfield:

**Compatibilism** (also known as soft determinism), is the belief that God's predetermination and meticulous providence is "compatible" with voluntary choice. In light of Scripture, human choices are believed to be exercised voluntarily but the desires and circumstances that bring about these choices about occur through divine determinism (see Acts 2:23 & 4:27-28). It should be noted that this position is no less deterministic than hard determinism - be clear that neither soft nor hard determinism believes man has a free will. Our choices are only our choices because they are voluntary, not coerced. We do not make choices contrary to our desires or natures. Compatibilism is directly contrary to libertarian free will.



# Compatibilism

Compatibilists say that you can never choose differently (that is libertarian free will), but that so long as you are not coerced, you are free.

So, if a person is born “dead in their sins” and sins according to their nature, compatibilists says that he or she is free.

They redefine freedom! It’s not the ability to do otherwise, it’s the ability to do “as you please” with no one stopping you.

# What is responsibility?

Responsibility simply means “able to respond.”

I hold it as sheer contradiction that we are unable to respond to God and yet are held responsible. This is no mystery, this is rank foolishness. Calvinism consistently tries to use redefine words in ways that ordinary people do not. The New Testament is composed fishermen-talk, not the talk of speculative philosophers using words in incomprehensible ways.

In fact, who has responsibility?

Jeremy Evans: “Ultimate responsibility...resides where the ultimate cause is.”

Everyone agrees that God created the world. Calvinists believe that God ordained Adam’s Fall. Thus responsibility for the human condition of sin (in Calvinism) is God’s. Some Calvinists like Jonathan Edwards are even comfortable calling God “the Author of sin.”

# In fact, Calvinism minimizes sin and grace!

Austin Fischer:

Calvinism attempts to stress sin and magnify grace by emphasizing our depravity: we are so depraved that God has to do every single bit of our salvation. God even determines our acceptance of the gift of salvation because we could not otherwise do so. But as already noted, for me this undermined both sin and grace because God is the ultimate cause of our sinfulness and depravity and as such his saving us is not an act of grace—God is merely fixing the problem he caused.

And so while I might respond to this gesture by saying, “God, you did the right thing,” I certainly wouldn’t respond by saying, “Thank you.” Or at least I wouldn’t know why I was saying, “Thank you.” And as noted earlier, if you cannot stand before the cross and understand why you are saying, “Thank you,” there’s a big problem. Sin is no longer sin and grace is no longer grace. No, in order for sin to be sin and grace be grace, we must stress sin and magnify grace in another way. The other way is rather obvious once it is pointed out to you. As copiously noted throughout, classic free-will theism wholeheartedly affirms totally depravity...

Instead of belittling sin and grace, I have come to believe free-will theism does the exact opposite.

# What makes our approach different?

It is Christo-centric!

If you want to know who God is, look at Jesus.

“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” John 14:9

“He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God.” Col 1:15

“He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” Hebrews 1:3

# Let's look at Jesus and understand God through Him

It is important to begin by clarifying the question. When people ask 'Was Jesus God?' they usually think they know what the word 'God' means, and are asking whether we can fit Jesus into that. I regard this as deeply misleading. (NT Wright)

This means Christian theology moves from Jesus to God, and not from what you think you know about God to Jesus. (Austin Fischer)

# Moving from Jesus to the sovereignty of God

What do we learn about this topic from Jesus?

Roger Olson:

Of course, Jesus, being God, could have healed everyone in Nazareth when he visited there (Mark 6:5), but he “couldn’t” do miracles there because of their lack of faith. As God, he had the sheer power to do miracles. But he had limited his power ordinarily to do miracles in the presence of faith. He did not want to go around unilaterally healing people without some measure of cooperating or receptive faith on their part. So it is with God’s sovereignty. He could exercise deterministic control, but he has chosen not to do so. As theologian E. Frank Tupper says, God is not a “do anything, anytime, anywhere kind of God” because he has chosen not to be that kind of God. He has chosen to make himself partially dependent on his human covenant partners while remaining the “superior covenant power of holy love.”

# An important passage about Jesus' incarnation

Philippians 2:3-8

3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

This is sometimes called the kenosis, the emptying of his privilege and power to take on human flesh. Jesus limits himself!

What is the alternative to divine determinism? Divine self-limitation.

In other words, God is sovereign over his sovereignty.

# Pick your mystery!

There are some mysteries that all professing Christians hold to:

For example, we don't know **how** God created the world, but we know **that** he created the world.

Both sides agree that God has libertarian free will. But they disagree over humans having libertarian free will.

For us, the mystery is not the one that Calvinists have.

Similarly, we don't know **how** God created humans with (at least partially) free will, but we know **that** we created humans with free will that can respond to God.

Leighton Flowers:

Which mystery is more difficult to swallow? One that seemingly suggests mankind might have some part to play in reconciliation (the bringing together of two parties) or the one that suggests God is the author of evil (that which divided to two parties to begin with)? More importantly, which of these mysteries does the Bible actually afford?

# The language of Scripture everywhere assumes that we can respond to God and have the power to choose

What are some Bible passages?

Genesis 4:

The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.”

Deut 30:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live

Ezek 18:30-32

30 Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. 31 Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? 32 For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live.

Acts 17:30

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent

“Should implies could”