

## OUR LIFE TOGETHER

### LESSON SIX: LIFE TOGETHER - WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT SALVATION

Author Ken Gire tells the story of a little girl who lived near the edge of a forest, and wandered off into the woods. She soon was discovered to be missing, and the search began.

Friends, family and volunteers looked into the night, but did not find her. Early the next morning, the girl's father saw her lying on a rock. Calling to her by name, he ran to her as fast as he could.

He wrapped her in his tight embrace, and she exclaimed, "Daddy, I found you!"

As we learned in the first lesson, we are lost before God. In Jesus, we are found. But who has found who? (Or is that, "Who has found whom?" Or, "whom has found who?")

Anyway, that is the core question as we enter this next study about the beliefs we teach, as we walk through our "life together."

Let's enter the issue of what we believe about salvation by asking and answering three questions. I thank Dr. Robert Reymond for teaching me this approach at Covenant Theological Seminary.

#### THE FIRST QUESTION: WHO SAVES US?

Some say *we save ourselves*.

Yes, we are sinners. But, these people say, we have the ability to do what is necessary to be worthy of salvation.

This is a view most associated with a man named Pelagius, who was a British monk around 500 A.D. But even if you have never heard of Pelagius, you are surrounded by Pelagians.

Many years ago, the Cincinnati Reds were flying from one glorious victory to another, when they flew into a horrific thunderstorm. The awful turbulence scared even the most experienced flyers.

Some people were praying. Some people were looking for motion-sickness bags. But, as usual,

Pete Rose was talking. He grinned at seatmate Hal King and said, "If this plane does down, I will be taking a lifetime .300 batting average with me. How about you?"

Without knowing it, Pete Rose wonderfully expressed the Pelagian view. A Pelagian believes he or she can attain a good enough "batting average" to satisfy God and be welcomed into heaven.

Isn't that the majority view in our culture? We say, "I've lived a good life. I've done this. I've done that. Hey, nobody's perfect, but I've tried my best."

Some say we save ourselves. But others say *God saves us*.

Yes, we are sinners. But no, these people say, we do not have the ability to do what is necessary to be worthy of salvation.

This was the teaching of Augustine, who lived about the same time as Pelagius, and taught against the teachings of Pelagius.

As we read earlier in Romans 3, *There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless.*

**WE BELIEVE GOD SAVES US.** If we are to be saved, God must do something for us that we cannot do for ourselves.

## THE SECOND QUESTION: HOW DOES GOD SAVE US?

Some say *God saves only through the church*. They believe saving grace comes only through the church, as it administers the sacraments. If you do not receive those sacraments, you will not receive salvation.

This is the historic teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and some Protestant groups.

Some say *God saves directly in individuals*. They believe God works directly upon the souls of people, to lead them to salvation.

Yes, they would say, the church and the sacraments are important. But the outward "sign" of the sacrament must reflect the inward reality of faith. We should participate in the sacraments, but if, for

some reason, we cannot, this does not affect our salvation.

***WE BELIEVE GOD SAVES US DIRECTLY.***

As we read in Romans 10, *That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*

### THE THIRD QUESTION: IN WHOM DOES GOD DO HIS SAVING WORK?

Now it gets interesting. Most professing, Protestant Christians will answer the first two questions in the same way. But a minority of professing Christians will answer the next question as we do.

Some say God does his saving work *in everybody*. They proclaim that God works to bring salvation to every single human being, without exception.

This teaching comes to us from a man named Jacob Arminius, who lived in the last half of the 1500s. We say his “followers” are Arminians.

Arminians believe Jesus has died for every single person who has lived, does live, and will live. Arminians also believe the Holy Spirit works in the heart of every single person who has lived, does live, and will live, in order to draw them to faith in Jesus.

Some say God does his saving work *in only the elect*. They proclaim that God works to bring salvation only to certain people - a group called the “chosen,” or the “elect.” God has chosen the people on this “list,” and when he does his saving work for them, they are saved.

This teaching comes to us from a man named John Calvin, who lived some years before Jacob Arminius, and who popularized teachings that are known as the “Reformed Tradition.”

***WE BELIEVE GOD DOES HIS SAVING WORK IN ONLY THE ELECT.***

### THE REFORMED EXPRESSION OF THE PLAN OF SALVATION

After answering those questions, it's time to walk through the way Reformed believers have described and defended their view of salvation.

This is known as “The Five Points of Calvinism,” or “TULIP,” because as we will see, the letters in each phrase form that acrostic.

But first, let’s notice two things:

\* John Calvin did not develop these points. Jacob Arminius, who lived after Calvin, developed five points that summarized his teaching. “Calvinists” developed these points as a response.

\* John Calvin taught a whole lot more than this. While we believe Calvin would have agreed with these five points, Calvin was a theologian who wrote on countless other subjects.

Why do I mention this? As humans, we tend to associate arguments with people. If I say, “The economy is in bad shape,” your response will be related to who I am.

If I am a person or politician who is on “your side,” you will quickly agree. If I am a person or politician who is on “the other side,” you may quickly disagree.

We see pictures of John Calvin, and we read stories of John Calvin, and he seems like a pretty unappealing character. But the issue for us isn’t, “Do we like John Calvin?” but, “Is this teaching biblically accurate?”

Now to the five points...

**1. TOTAL DEPRAVITY: WE ARE CORRUPT IN EVERY PART OF OUR NATURE.**

Our wills are corrupt. Our minds are corrupt. Our bodies are corrupt. Our hearts are corrupt. There is no part of us that is free from the stain of sin.

In Ephesians 2, as we learned in the first lesson, Paul offers hard but true words: we are dead in sin. Not out of order. Not under the weather. Dead.

As well, Jesus said to a self-righteous man, “No one is good but God.”

This does not mean we are as bad as we can be. If we were as bad as we can be, this world would be unspeakably awful. But it does mean our corruption is skin deep and heart deep.

Another truth follows from this: we possess not only total depravity, but *total inability*. We are

sinners through and through, and contrary to Pelagius' view, we are unable to change this.

What if you announced, "I shall now ascend to the highest building in this city, and with a leap and a bound, fly to the second-highest building, four blocks over"?

What would we say to you? "You can't do that. You are simply not capable of it. You can wish all you want, but your nature forbids that. Come, let's sit down and have a Fig Newton."

In the same way, the doctrine of total depravity teaches that our nature, fallen in sin, simply will not allow us to find our way back to God on our own.

We must grasp this, or we won't grasp the rest of this! We want to believe in the natural goodness of human beings. But that is not the Bible's perspective.

## ***2. UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION: GOD HAS CHOSEN TO SAVE SOME OF US.***

Also in Ephesians - this time in chapter 1 - Paul sings the praises of God:

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*

*For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.*

*In love, he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.*

When was this "election"? Before the creation of the world. Before God made his people, he chose to save his people.

Why was this "election"? In accordance with his pleasure and will. It is not because we had more goodness, or more potential, or more anything.

This is where we get the word "unconditional." We cannot look ourselves and see any "conditions," or qualities, that would get God to choose us. We are no better than anyone. Salvation is purely a gift of God's mercy and kindness.

### **3. LIMITED ATONEMENT: CHRIST DIED ONLY FOR THE ELECT.**

Now it gets really interesting. Many Christians will endorse the first two points, but only a minority of Christians will embrace this point.

If we are going to sort through this, we have to start with a couple of questions:

\* *What is atonement?* We know the word, but do we know what it means?

Atonement is providing real, actual satisfaction for sin. As we have learned, a just God must punish sin, and Jesus died to atone for sin.

His death did not just provide the possibility of atonement. It provided actual atonement.

\* *What happened at the cross?* We know the story, but do we know the significance?

When Jesus spilled his blood at the cross, his blood provided real, actual satisfaction for sin. It did not provide the possibility that God would forgive sin. It secured that forgiveness.

Let's say you have a debt - maybe the debt on your house. I am a generous and gracious person, and I decide to pay your debt for you. I go to the bank, and I place the money on the table.

What has happened? Have I provided the possibility that your debt will be paid? Or have I provided real, actual payment of your debt? When my payment is applied to your account, you actually become free of that debt.

In John 10, Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life. But for whom does Jesus lay down his life? *For his sheep.*

We believe every drop of Jesus' blood was effective. We believe every drop of Jesus' blood provided actual satisfaction for sin.

If that is so, then one of two things must be true:

1 - If Jesus died for every person without exception, and each drop of that blood is effective, then every person will be saved. This is "universalism" - which the Bible clearly rejects.

2 - If Jesus died for only his people, every person he died for, will be saved. This is the heart of

Jesus' teaching about his laying down of his life for his sheep. They are his. He died for them. He won't let anyone take them from him.

In a sense, we all believe in "Limited Atonement." The Calvinist limits its extent (only to the elect), while the Arminian limits the effect (only to those who believe).

Why is the Calvinist teaching so unpopular? I believe because Arminianism appeals to our American sensibilities.

We don't like to see people left out. We don't like to see one group of people treated better than another group of people. We want to see everyone have a chance.

But here is the heart of Reformed teaching: apart from God's mercy, none of us have a chance. The only way we will be saved, is if God does something for us, that we cannot do for ourselves, and that he does not do for everyone.

Here is a friendly challenge: read John 10, Romans 9 and Ephesians 1-2. Read them not as an American, but as a Christian. I believe you will see the strength of the Reformed teaching.

The final two points follow from the first three:

#### ***4. IRRESISTABLE GRACE: GOD WILL CAUSE ELECT SINNERS TO BELIEVE IN JESUS***

What about faith? Isn't that important? Yes! This fourth "point" reflects the teaching of Ephesians 2, where Paul describes faith as a gift.

Remember, we are dead in sin. But God "makes us alive" in Jesus. We believe in Jesus, because God blesses us with the gift of faith in Jesus.

Think also of John 3, where Jesus uses famous words about being "born again." How can someone give birth to himself? It's impossible! Someone must give birth to us.

So in the same way that we cannot raise ourselves from the dead, we cannot give ourselves life. God must do it for us. By his Holy Spirit, working in manifold and mysterious ways, God changes our hearts and turns us to faith in Jesus.

Yes, we can and do resist! But God is like a great defensive back. He will chase you down and tackle you before the end of the play. He will finally overcome our resistance, and we will believe.

##### **5. PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS: GOD WILL KEEP TRUE CHRISTIANS IN THE FAITH.**

In Romans 8, Paul provides us with the entire “chain” of salvation:

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

*For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

*And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

Do you see the progression? God has planned our salvation from before the beginning of the world, so he will carry out his plan until the end of time.

But we wonder, “What about those people who appear to be Christians, then fall away and never come back?” Let me offer two responses.

First, *we do not know hearts*. We struggle to know our own hearts, much less the hearts of others! We find this in marriage. We are consistently discovering new (and hopefully attractive) characteristics of our spouses. But only God sees all and knows all.

In Matthew 7, Jesus speaks of people who do religious things, but are not truly God’s. The issue is not whether we say we know God. The issue is whether God knows us.

Second, *we do not know histories*. Our history is our story - the journey of our lives. It may last seven hours, seven years, seventy years, or even longer.

Who is there for the entire history? Not you, and not me. Only God is. For example, do we always know what is in the heart of a person, as he or she approaches death? No.

When we say people “fall away and never come back”, we are speaking beyond what we can

know. God can change a heart in a womb, and God can change a heart on a deathbed.

Does he? Why not? The point is, only he knows. We can say a person died with no evidence of faith that we could see, but only God knows every bit of the history.

Are you a true believer? As you search your heart and life, can you profess genuine faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord? This truth provides the glorious promise that the God who once took a hold of you, will never let you go.

What about that little girl who was lost in the woods? Did she find her father, or did her father find her? Her father found her - so that she could find him.

That is the heart of what we believe about this issue. We didn't find God, because we couldn't find God until he found us. But he has found us. He has rushed to us and spurred us to embrace him. Now he holds us tightly, and he will not let us go.

#### **A FEW FINAL, BUT IMPORTANT THOUGHTS**

I know from personal and pastoral experience that these teachings are tough for people to handle.

I also want to assure you that we are definitely in the realm of the "distinctive" beliefs of our "life together" at Christ Presbyterian Church. You will hear this teaching here, and we hope you will see why we believe it is biblical. But our members do not need to be "five-point Calvinists"!

I would like to reflect on this teaching with three closing thoughts:

##### **1. *THIS IS A DEEP MYSTERY.***

Here is the Bible in six words: "You need Jesus. Here is Jesus." The Bible does not speak often about the issues in this lesson. It is as if in certain places, God decides to open a curtain and reveal a small shaft of light about the mysteries of salvation.

If you claim to meet someone who has all this figured out, run for your life! God's ways are so

mysterious to us. It's okay to acknowledge that. The Bible does.

I like to distinguish between the "what" and the "how" of the gospel:

\* The "what" - repent and believe!

\* The "how" - I chose you from before the creation of the world.

The Bible tells us much more about "what." We are not called to decide who is elect, and who is not. We are called to preach the gospel to everyone, with confidence that God's Spirit will overcome the resistance in the hearts of those he has chosen.

There is a way of thinking called "Hypercalvinism." It is the idea that since God knows who will be saved, we don't need to preach the gospel.

But Paul, who teaches us more about this issue than anyone, rejects this thinking. He was the greatest "Calvinist," and also the greatest evangelist, in the history of the church. How, he asks in Romans 10, can people believe in Jesus until they hear the gospel?

The God who ordains our salvation, also ordained how we will be saved. We believe the "how." We proclaim the "what."

## ***2. THIS IS ABOUT PURE GRACE.***

C.S. Lewis once wandered into a room during a vigorous argument. He asked, as only he could, "What's the rumpus about?" The debaters were discussing what Christianity uniquely teaches.

Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."

A man once gave his testimony of believing in Jesus. A listener said, "That was great, but you didn't talk about what you did to get saved - what you contributed."

The man said, "I contributed my sin."

We sing, "Amazing Grace." We fill our "church" language with this word "grace." But do we really mean it? Or do we proudly hold on to even a shred of credit for our salvation?

While this so-called "Reformed" teaching is hard to some and distasteful to many, it consistently

shines the light of glory right where it belongs: on God. Salvation is “all of grace.”

### **3. THIS PROVIDES GREAT COMFORT.**

God has planned it all. Jesus has paid it all. The Holy Spirit has provoked it all.

In Romans 8, after Paul lays out the chain of salvation, he rejoices as he writes,

*What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?*

*He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?...*

*I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!*

We struggle through this world, and we are painfully aware of our flaws and failures. God is always faithful to us, but we are not always faithful to him.

Where is our comfort? In Christ alone, our hope is found. No power of hell, no scheme of man, can ever pluck us from his hand.

Did we find him, or did he find us? He found us, and he stirred our hearts to find him. In this, we find joy and peace.