

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. At the end of our last session we were discussing the reformed, or biblical, doctrine of God's irresistible grace. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: Well, we have already noted that this doctrine, while it is denied by the post-reformation Roman Catholic church, Arminians and Lutherans, is biblical. It was not something that first appeared in the reformation though, it had been the teaching of the Roman Catholic church, through St. Augustine, long before the reformation. But, the most important question, in fact, the only one that really matters, is what does the Word say? And, on that score, the answer is clear.

Marc Roby: In our last session we quoted Roman 8:30 in support of this doctrine, which says that those God "predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."¹

Dr. Spencer: And that passage, which is sometimes called the "golden chain" of salvation², is clear biblical support for irresistible grace. But there is much more.

Marc Roby: What other Scriptures would you cite in support of the doctrine?

Dr. Spencer: Well, let's begin in the Old Testament. God tells us in Isaiah 55:10-11, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

Marc Roby: That is a clear statement of the efficacy of God's Word. What other Scriptures would you cite?

Dr. Spencer: In the famous passage in Ezekiel 36:26-27, God declares, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." And note that God says *I will* give you a new heart, *I will* remove your heart of stone, and *I will* put my Spirit in you to *move you* to follow my decrees.

God doesn't just make salvation possible and hold out an invitation for us to accept or reject, he removes our old heart, gives us a new one, and puts his Spirit in us to move us to obedience. In other words, he causes us to be born again.

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² e.g., see R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 143

Marc Roby: And, as we noted last time, that metaphor of new birth is itself significant evidence that we play no role in our regeneration. It is a monergistic work of God.

Dr. Spencer: And a monergistic work means a work that is done by one person alone, in this case, God. It is the opposite of a synergistic work in which two or more parties cooperate. Just as no one is responsible for bringing about his own physical birth, so no one is responsible, even in part, for bringing about his own re-birth.

Marc Roby: That reminds me of what John wrote in his gospel. In John 1:12-13 we read, “to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's a good passage. Our new birth is not the result of human decision. This is really the crux of the issue in irresistible grace. Does God cause us to be born again, or do we cooperate? Those who want to say we cooperate are concerned with preserving the idea of man's free will, while those who say we do not cooperate are concerned with preserving God's sovereignty.

Marc Roby: And, of course, as you said earlier, the only question that really matters is what does the Word of God say?

Dr. Spencer: And, while we have not gone through all of the verses we could, we have adduced a number of verses to argue that Scripture teaches that God is sovereign not only in electing some to salvation, but then in bringing that salvation about by the irresistible working of his Holy Spirit causing a person to be born again.

But we must be careful to note that we still truly and freely *respond* to God's call. He monergistically changes our nature through re-birth but then, in that new nature, we freely choose to repent and believe. As it says in the Westminster Confession of Faith, “All those whom God has predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by his almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.”³

Marc Roby: This goes back to our discussion of free will. We do have the freedom to choose what to do, but our choice will always be consistent with our nature. Prior to being regenerated, all men are enemies of God and will not, in fact *cannot* turn to him in faith.

Dr. Spencer: In fact, Paul wrote in Romans 8:7-8 that “the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please

³ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. 10, Par. 1

God.” And repenting and believing would please God, so they are among those things that an unregenerate person simply cannot do.

And finishing what you were saying about the fact that we do have the ability to choose what to do, once God causes us to be born again, we have a new heart. In other words, we have a new mind, will, affections and so on.

Marc Roby: I like the way Paul puts it in Romans 6:18. He says that “You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.”

Dr. Spencer: That expresses it very well. Before God regenerates us, we are slaves to sin and could not choose what is good, but then regeneration frees us from sin and we become slaves to righteousness. And so, as new creations in Christ Jesus, we freely choose to repent, believe and walk in obedience.

Marc Roby: What Paul calls the obedience of faith in Romans 1:5.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. The question boils down to how significant is that work that is required to save us? Is it just a matter of persuading us to the truth of the gospel? Or, as the doctrine of total depravity would indicate and as the Bible teaches, are we truly enemies of God in need of a whole new nature? The 19th-century theologian Charles Hodge wrote that “If regeneration is a change effected by the man’s own will; if it be due to the mere force of truth and motives, it is a small affair. But if it be the effect of the mighty power of God, it is as to its nature and consequences supernatural and divine. The whole nature of Christianity turns on this point.”⁴

Marc Roby: Now that is a strong statement.

Dr. Spencer: It is very strong, but I think it is correct. We don’t just need a little help to be saved, we need radical change. The biblical doctrines all logically fit together. Back in Session 128 I quoted R.C. Sproul, who wrote that “If one embraces this aspect of the T in TULIP, the rest of the acrostic follows by a resistless logic.”⁵

If we are totally depraved, then we are incapable of responding to God’s command to repent and believe. Therefore, if our salvation depended on us, no one would be saved. God must work first. And the very first thing God did with regard to our salvation was accomplished in eternity past. We read in Ephesians 1:4 that God chose us in Christ “before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”

Marc Roby: And that election must have been unconditional if total depravity is true since there is nothing in us, and nothing we can do, that will merit salvation in any way.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And his grace must be irresistible because, as totally depraved sinners, we *would* resist it to the end if that were possible. It’s interesting to note that independent of the

⁴ C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. II, pg 697

⁵ Sproul, op. cit., pg. 128

position of the modern Lutheran church, Martin Luther himself would have agreed on this point. In his famous work *The Bondage of the Will*, he wrote that “now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him. . . . Thus it is that, if not all, yet some, indeed many, are saved; whereas, by the power of ‘free-will’ none at all could be saved, but every one of us would perish.”⁶

Marc Roby: That’s very interesting. His final conclusion is exactly what we have been saying. If it were left up to the supposed freedom of our own unregenerate will to accept God’s offer of salvation, “none at all could be saved, but every one of us would perish.”

Dr. Spencer: And although it would be anachronistic to speak of Martin Luther having anything to say directly about TULIP, since that acrostic came more than 70 years after his death, this quote does tie in one more of the five doctrines represented by the acrostic. Notice that he said that because our salvation is under the control of God’s will, he has “the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him.”

And, although I left it out of the quote the first time, he then cites John 10:28-29 where Jesus is speaking to the Jews about his followers and says that “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”

Marc Roby: That is marvelous comfort indeed. We are held in Christ’s hands, and in the Father’s hands.

Dr. Spencer: And it supports the fourth doctrine we want to look at from the TULIP acrostic; namely, the perseverance of the saints.

Marc Roby: Although, as has been pointed out by many, a better name for the doctrine might be the preservation of the saints since our confidence is really in God’s sovereign power, not our ability to persevere.

Dr. Spencer: That’s very true. All of God’s chosen people will persevere, but only because he enables them to do so. Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, as we read in Philippians 1:4-6, that “In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Marc Roby: And when Paul refers to the “day of Christ Jesus” he is, of course, referring to Christ’s second coming, which he wrote about in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, where we read, “For

⁶ M. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, Trans. By J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnson, Fleming H. Revell Comp., 1957, pg. 314

the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is the glorious hope that all true believers have. God will complete the work he has begun in each one of us and we will be given a glorious body like that of the resurrected Christ we are told in Philippians 3:21. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is also supported by Romans 8:30, which we have looked at a number of times. It says that those God “predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” No one who is predestined by God for salvation is able to finally and utterly fall away. So, although true Christians can certainly backslide and fall into serious sin, they will always be brought to true repentance.

Marc Roby: That is a great comfort. Paul also wrote, in 1 Corinthians 1:8-9, that Jesus Christ “will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.”

Dr. Spencer: And Paul also said, in his benediction to the church in Thessalonica, as we read in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.”

The message in all of these verses is consistent. God is faithful and as the sovereign Lord over all creation, he will save those whom he has chosen to save. Not one of them will be lost.

Marc Roby: This does not mean, however, that everyone who *professes* to be a Christian will ultimately be saved.

Dr. Spencer: Not at all. That would contradict Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7:21, where he tells us that “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

Marc Roby: That verse should make everyone who claims to be a Christian shudder. As Paul commands us in Philippians 2:12, we should work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we should. We can have assurance of faith, as we will discuss later, but that is not incompatible with a careful, honest and even fearful, self-evaluation. Our confidence is based on God’s truthfulness, power and faithfulness, not on ours. He alone is unchangeable and cannot lie or be deceived. But, at the same time, we can never be presumptuous in believing that we are among God’s elect. The biblical doctrines of unconditional election, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints should never, ever be used in a presumptuous way. If we have been born again, we *will* live in a way that makes that new birth evident. If we don’t, we have no basis for personal assurance.

Marc Roby: In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told us to “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will

recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.”

Dr. Spencer: That is a very important principle. We must examine our own fruit. It is easy to *say* “I repent”, but true repentance always includes turning away from the sin. We are told in Acts 26:20 that the apostle Paul, in speaking before King Agrippa, said, “First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.”

Marc Roby: And, when the Pharisees and Sadducees came to John the Baptist, we read in Matthew 3:7-8 that he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”

Dr. Spencer: And, most famously of course, in James Chapter Two we have the discourse about faith without works. James asks a serious question in Verse 14, “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” And he then goes on to explain that a faith without deeds, in other words, without proof of a changed heart, will not save anyone.

In fact, he points out that even the demons have an intellectual faith, but the result is that they shudder in abject fear.

Marc Roby: True saving faith is more than just knowing and agreeing with the facts of the gospel. We must place our personal trust in Jesus Christ.

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly right. And we will talk about that more later, but I think we have said all that we need to for now about the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

Marc Roby: And with that we have completed four of the five doctrines represented by the acrostic TULIP. We’ve discussed total depravity, unconditional election, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints. So that only leaves the doctrine of limited atonement.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is the only one left. But we are nearly out of time for today, so I think we had better stop. And this podcast will be released on December 26th, the day after Christmas. So, before we sign off, I’d like to take this opportunity to wish all of our listeners a blessed Christmas and a victorious new year in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Marc Roby: I join you in that and I will also remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, we would appreciate hearing from you.