

## On Sin and Sovereign Grace

### Introduction

*Read Romans 9:14-24.*

This is a tough passage, its words seem to fly in the face of our modern sense of self-determination. Verse 16 is especially sharp regarding God's power in salvation: "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy" (Rom 9:16 ESV). The words of Scripture here are abundantly clear that salvation is ultimately not dependent upon human will or exertion but solely upon the mercy and grace of God.

To help clarify our thinking about this topic further, we'll ask and answer this question: is God sovereign over grace? That is, does he choose to whom he extends his special, saving grace? Are they alone saved and no one else? To answer our question, we'll begin by taking a look at the biblical foundations of this doctrine and then we'll take a peak at church history to understand how sovereign grace has been understood over time.

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### Biblical Foundation

In laying the biblical foundation for our explanation of this question—is God sovereign over grace?—we'll begin in the Garden of Eden.

#### I. The Garden

**The perfection of creation** (Gen 1:31-2:3).

- Everything God had made was very good.

**Freedom with one rule** (Gen 2:15-17).

- Chronologically, the first command that God gave to Adam was in Genesis 1:29. There, God commands, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food" (Gen 1:29). God is abundant in providing for his creation. He is full of love and good.
- However, he does hand down one rule: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You must surely eat of every tree of the garden, but 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 2:15-17).

#### II. What Happened at the Fall of Mankind?

**Sin entered** (Gen 3).

- 1 John 3:4
- Fundamentally, sin is rebellion against God, whether it be intentional or unintentional. It is "any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature."<sup>1</sup>
- Adam and Eve became sinners.

**Mankind spiritually died** (Gen 3:20; Rom 5:12).

- Their sin did not stay with them; they passed it along (Rom 5:12).

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<sup>1</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 490.

- This passage compares two men: Adam and Christ.
- In Adam, all mankind sinned.
  - Adam represented all humanity. Being our representative, his guilt is counted as our guilt (Rom 5:18-19). His actions were determinative for all the members who are united to him. Adam represented all people; therefore, his sin is reckoned to his descendants.<sup>2</sup>
  - The result is that we inherit both Adam's sin nature and his sin guilt (1 Cor 15:22).
- Mankind has no spiritual good.
  - This does not mean that people always act as badly as they could; nor does it mean that unsaved people cannot do relative acts of goodness.<sup>3</sup>
  - The entirety of the person is affected, both body and soul are corrupted by sin.
    - No part of man escapes. This includes both the material and immaterial aspects of a person—both body and soul. The body decays and is headed for physical death, and along the way, the body functions as an instrument for evil activity. The spiritual part of man is also fully corrupt. This includes all of man's thinking, reasoning, desires, and affections.<sup>4</sup>
    - Titus 1:15; Eph 4:17-18; Mark 7:21-23
- Mankind is incapable of seeking any true spiritual good, much less advancing toward God on his own.
  - Rom 8:7-8
  - 1 Cor 2:14—Natural man will always reject the gospel.
  - Jn 15:5

### III. Old Testament Examples

- Gen 4—Cain murders Abe
- Genesis 6:5—Great wickedness, every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. This wickedness resulted in the flood.

*Well, what about the people of Israel?*

- Unable to obey truly and wholly from the heart (Deut 10:12-11:1, 29:2-4).
- They needed a work of God's grace, heart surgery (Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4).
- God will do this for them, it is an act of his grace alone (Deut 30:6-7; Ezek 36:22-32).
  - And what's more, he will indwell them with his Holy Spirit (Ezek 36:27).

### IV. New Testament Examples

- Eph 2:1-3, 4:18
- Titus 1:15
- 2 Cor 4:4

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<sup>2</sup>John MacArthur, ed., *Essential Christian Doctrine: A Handbook on Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 255.

<sup>3</sup>MacArthur, 257.

<sup>4</sup>MacArthur, 257.

## V. Regeneration

*If, as the Scripture says, that the human heart is spiritually dead. How can anyone be saved? If we as those who were represented by and guilty in Adam are incapable of spiritual good, how could we ever ascend to God? **The truth is that he came down to save us.***

This is called regeneration. Regeneration is the act of God whereby he, the author of life, breathes spiritual life into us who are otherwise dead.

“He powerfully summons the sinner out of his spiritual death and blindness and, by virtue of the creative power of his word, imparts new spiritual life to him—giving him a new heart, along with eyes to see and ears to hear, and thus enabling him to repent and believe in Christ for salvation”.<sup>5</sup>

- Eph 2:1-5
- Titus 3:5
- Romans 5:8
- 2 Cor 4:6

Often the Bible describes this process as being called by God: **Rom 8:30; 1 Cor 1:24; 2 Tim 1:9; 1 Pet 5:10; 2 Pet 1:3.** He effectually calls his people “out of darkness” and “into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). This is the new birth.<sup>6</sup>

In the new birth, God gives people the ability to see Christ and believe in him. When God calls someone he does it effectually. That is, the new birth is always effective. No person who is born again fails to have faith in Christ. We see this truth clearly expressed in **Romans 8:30** and **John 6:37-40.** *See also John 6:44.*

## VI. Our Response

*It is clear that because of sin, no person is able to come to God in their own power. In John 6:44, Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”*

What is the appropriate response to these truths? Humility. I’ll quote Wayne Grudem at length:

The application to our lives is quite evident: if God gives anyone a desire to repent and trust in Christ, he or she should not delay and should not harden his or her heart (cf. Heb. 3:7-8; 12:17). The ability to repent and desire to trust in God is not naturally ours but is given by the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and it will not last forever. “Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Heb. 13:15).<sup>7</sup>

- *See also John 1:9-13.*

Further, the fact that all people are spiritually dead and only made alive by God’s regenerating grace does not exclude us from the work of evangelism. On the contrary, knowing that God is the one who effectually calls people to himself, is greatly encouraging in our efforts

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<sup>5</sup>MacArthur, 300-301.

<sup>6</sup>MacArthur, 301.

<sup>7</sup>Grudem, 498.

to share Christ with people. If God desires to save them, he will surely do it. Our responsibility is not to wonder who God has chosen to call to himself or even worse make speculative judgments about who that may or may not be. Rather, our job is to proclaim the gospel to whomever we have the opportunity. We sow the seed of the gospel in as many hearts as we can trusting that it is God who gives the growth (1 Cor 3:6).

Consider how this is addressed in **Romans 10:5-17**. Faith comes through hearing and hearing through the word of Christ. God has chosen to use our feeble proclamation of the gospel as his means to effectually draw people to himself.

*In summary, the biblical foundations we have covered look like this:*

- In the beginning, everything created by God was very good.
- Sin entered the world through Adam and Eve.
- Through the sin of Adam and Eve, mankind spiritually died.
  - This means that humans following Adam and Eve—with the exception of Jesus Christ—have no spiritual good in themselves, are totally corrupt in body and spirit, and are unable to seek spiritual good in and of themselves.
- As a result of mankind’s spiritual deadness, God must give life—regenerate—to save.
- Our response is to have faith in Jesus Christ and to proclaim the good news of Christ to all.<sup>8</sup>

Do you remember our original question: is God sovereign over grace?

*How does this information from the Scripture help us answer that question?*

- Apart from a gracious work of God we are not able to be saved.
- The natural person will always reject the gospel (1 Cor 2:14-15).
- Therefore, God is sovereign over grace.
  - Salvation does not depend on human will or exertion but on God who has mercy (Rom 9:16).

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## Historical Understanding<sup>9</sup>

### I. Patristic Era

**Early Greek fathers.** In response to Gnosticism, had a nuanced understanding of original sin that did not envelop the whole person in corruption due to sin. These men prepared the way for many of Pelagius’s ideas.

**Early Western fathers.** These men imbibed the view from the East but began to edge closer to a view of original sin and total depravity. Especially Tertullian, Cyprian, Hilary, and Ambrose.

### II. Augustine and Pelagius

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<sup>8</sup>As my friend Jacoby Jordan says: “God does what he wants, but we gotta do what he says.”

<sup>9</sup>Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), 135. This section was primarily developed from this work. This is a very over-simplified explanation of these doctrines but, Lord willing, still depicts the pertinent parts of the debate faithfully.

**The debate.** These men developed their theologies independently of one another but were also influenced in their final forms by the thought of the other.

**Augustine (354-430).**

- Mankind cannot do any spiritual good.
- Believed that Adam's sinful nature was passed along to his descendents.
- Affirmed that mankind is dead in their sins.
- Believed that a work of God was required to save sinners.

**Pelagius** "A British-born Roman theologian (ca. AD 354–415) who maintained that a person could fulfill the law apart from divine grace and therefore could merit salvation through good works. His views were vehemently opposed by Augustine of Hippo."<sup>10</sup>

- Denied the sin nature of mankind.
- Believed that one could choose to sin or to refrain from sinning—like Adam.
- Believed that a person could fulfill the law apart from divine grace and therefore could merit salvation through good works.
- Condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431.<sup>11</sup>

### III. Semi-Pelagianism

- Attempted to reconcile the two views by giving place to both divine grace and human will as that which renews mankind.
- However, man must begin salvation by seeking God. Something that the natural man cannot do (1 Cor 2:14).
- Condemned at the council of Orange in 529.

### IV. Anselm of Canterbury

**True Freedom.** Anselm contributed to the conversation by providing a helpful definition of free will:

But if we have a total inability to do any spiritual good in God's sight, then do we still have any freedom of choice? Certainly, those how are outside of Christ do still make voluntary choices—that is, they decide what they want to do, then they do it. In this sense there is still a kind of "freedom" in the choices that people make. Yet because of their inability to do good and to escape their fundamental rebellion against God and their fundamental preference for sin, unbelievers do not have freedom in the most important sense of freedom—that is, the freedom to do right, and to do what is pleasing to God.<sup>12</sup>

### V. Calvin and Arminius

**Calvin (1509-1564).** Early on in his ministry in Geneva, Calvin was accused of being a Socinian. Socinianism is a bundle heresy that repackages Pelagianism along with a denial of the Trinity. In order to clear his name and clarify his theological position, John wrote extensively on the relationship between the sinful nature of mankind and God's sovereign grace.

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<sup>10</sup>Douglas Mangum, *The Lexham Glossary of Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup>MacArthur, 252.

<sup>12</sup>Grudem, 498.

**Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609)**

- Repackaged semi-pelagianism.
- Refuted at the Synod of Dort (1618-1619).

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**Application**

**God gets all the glory; we have no room to boast.**

**We must be shaped by God.** When we encounter truths in the Scripture that are difficult for us to swallow, we must submit to what he says and follow him. We do not pass judgment on the Scripture, we are to allow ourselves to be molded by it.

- Isaiah 55:9
- We are the Mariana snail fish, God is the soaring eagle.