

# Reformed Soteriology (“TULIP”) - Week 1

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## Introduction

We’re talking in this series of classes about what it means to be Reformed. Phil covered some of the fundamentals last week as well as some of the history. If you missed that, I’d encourage you to go listen to the recording. This week and next we’re going to focus in on a particular aspect of Reformed theology which is crucially important, and that’s our soteriology. “Soteriology” means “doctrine of salvation.” In other words, “how do people get saved.” This is the big question that we’re going to be asking: is the salvation of sinners a work of God from start to finish, completely of his doing, or is it a cooperative effort between God and man? Can man contribute anything at all toward his own salvation, or is the salvation of sinners completely and entirely of the Lord? Another way to ask it, “is God completely sovereign - completely in control - in the matter of our salvation, or does he give up some control for one reason or another, for the sake of human freedom, for instance?” When you think about being Reformed, it’s these questions about salvation that probably come to mind. That’s what we’ll talk about this morning and next week. But you need to understand that Reformed theology is much bigger than the question about how people get saved. It’s really an entire worldview. I submit to you that it’s the biblical worldview (otherwise we would reject it). Reformed theology is just a summary - a restatement - of the biblical worldview. And the heart of that worldview is this: that God is the Creator and Lord over all of the cosmos - every square inch. And he governs all things - *all things* - according to the council of his will. “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” (Rom 11:36) God’s sovereignty in our salvation is just one piece of the larger truth that God is sovereign over absolutely everything. We’ll talk about that this morning.

To start off, it’s important to understand what’s at stake in this discussion. Most everyone agrees that there are Christians of good faith on both sides. No one is claiming that you have to believe everything I say this morning in order to be a Christian. But the stakes are very high.

One side of the debate will make this argument: If God is in direct control of everything, including a person’s decision to either accept or reject the gospel, then human freedom is an illusion. It turns people into robots. And if people are not free, then it would be unjust for God to judge people for their actions. In other words, if people are not “able” to obey then it is unjust to hold them responsible for not obeying. And if God is unjust, then everything falls apart.

Furthermore, they'll say, it makes God responsible for sin. And if God can sin then he isn't really God at all.

This is a serious objection, and we need to think hard about it. We won't answer all of those questions directly this morning. Daniel is going to do an entire class in two weeks on some of these hard questions, but we'll touch on them a bit.

The other side, the Reformed side, says something like this:

The Bible is crystal clear that God is the sovereign Lord over absolutely everything in all creation. This includes human action and human decisions, and it includes our salvation. Furthermore, the Bible is clear that man is absolutely helpless to contribute anything toward his salvation. We acknowledge that there is mystery involved, but we hold that God is both righteous in all his ways, and that he is in complete control of everything in his creation, because that's what the Bible teaches. To be God is to be sovereign. A God who isn't sovereign isn't really God at all.

As you can see, the stakes are high. We're not quibbling about how many angels can fit on the head of a pin. We're talking about what kind of God it is that we serve. What is God like? How does the universe work? I hope you'll see that as we go.

Our church is not neutral on this question. We embrace the Reformed understanding of scripture on God's sovereignty and our salvation. It's one of our core doctrinal beliefs. In fact, it's written into our confession of faith.

God has decreed in himself from all eternity all things, whatever comes to pass, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably. (3.1)

Although God knows everything that may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet His decree is not the result of what he foresaw or that which would come to pass upon such conditions. (3.2)

(This is responding to a particular alternative understanding of God's predestination which we'll discuss later)

By the decree of God for the demonstration of his glory, some men and angels are predestined, or foreordained, to eternal life through Jesus Christ to the praise of his glorious grace, others being left to act in their sin to their just condemnation to the praise of his glorious justice. (3.3)

That's all from the Trinity Fellowship statement of faith, which is built around the 1689 London Baptist Confession. We believe that this is what the Bible teaches. We aren't Calvinists just because our parents were. In fact, for many of us, they weren't. Our elders didn't inherit

their Reformed theology from their parents. They became Calvinists out of conviction that it was what the scripture teaches. That's probably true of many in my generation as well. My kids have grown up Reformed, but I did not. I'll tell you a quick part of my own story.

My father was, and still is, a Southern Baptist pastor. My dad would now call himself Reformed, but did not when I was growing up. So I was not taught the things that we're going to discuss today. We had a couple of weirdo Calvinists in our church, and I knew they believed something about "predestination," but I had no idea what it was about. It wasn't something that we talked about. It was a quirky doctrinal curiosity, sort of on par with the different views about the rapture. When I went to college, by God's grace I fell in with some serious, thoughtful Christians, one of which in particular turned out to be a Calvinist. I had a lot of respect for him, and so I was forced to take his strange ideas seriously. Those were the days for late night debates about all sorts of different things. One particular night at my friend's house, Calvinism was on the docket. Jordan Liggitt was there with me and this other friend. He and I went late into the night discussing and debating Reformed theology with my Calvinist friend. It was the first time that Reformed doctrine, the idea that God was completely in control of absolutely everything, had been clearly explained to me. I put up a fight for a little while, but at some point that night my defenses completely crumbled. I knew it was true. I instinctively pushed back, but I knew it was true. And it was an overwhelming experience. It was so overwhelming that at one point I had to excuse myself from the room. I went into the bathroom and I got on my knees and prayed. I don't remember what I prayed. I just knew that this was true, and it changed everything. My understanding of God had completely changed. I know that I never thought the same way about God or about anything else after that night. I don't want to portray this as a conversion experience. I was a Christian before that night. I loved God and trusted Jesus as my Savior. But I had been wrong about him in some serious ways. This was a ground-shifting change for me, and fairly dramatic. I don't know exactly when I got saved, but I remember the night I became Reformed.

## History

Let's quickly recap a bit of the history. Phil showed us last week that this is an age-old debate. It did not begin in the 16th century with the Protestant Reformation. I hope to show that it goes all the way back to Paul, but the debate is certainly old as the church.

### 1. Pelagian controversy

During the 4th-5th century there was a debate known as the Pelagian controversy. The central figures were Augustine, who was a bishop in North Africa, and Pelagius, who was an Irish theologian. Augustine was a theological giant and one of the most important figures in the history of the church. You certainly need to remember his name.

Pelagius rejected the notion that humans were born with a sinful nature. He said that all babies are born in the same sinless state as Adam. Everyone has the power within himself to

believe the gospel and to obey God's law completely. So he had a very radical view of free will. There were essentially no limits to the freedom of the will.

Augustine rejected Pelagianism completely. He believed that the sin of Adam had corrupted human nature, and that no one had the power within themselves to obey God's command. Only by grace could anyone believe and obey.

Augustine won the debate. It was never really a fair fight. Augustine was very persuasive (and right). The church condemned Pelagianism at the Council of Carthage in 418, and Pelagianism became widely recognized as a heresy.

## 2. Semi-Pelagianism

As Pelagianism was discredited, an alternative formulation arose that tried to offer a middle way between Pelagius and Augustine. It later came to be called "semi-pelagianism."

This view acknowledged that Adam's sin is passed on and that human nature is corrupted, but they said that man has the power within himself to take the first step toward God, and this first step obtains God's grace.

They said that God equally wishes all men to be saved, and extends his grace equally to all, so that the final determination of who will be saved rests in the free will of the individual. The hand of grace is extended to all, and it is up to the will of the individual to reach out and receive the grace that is offered.

This view was also rejected by a church council at the Council of Orange in 529, but it didn't go away, as we'll see.

## 3. Aquinas (Catholic doctrine)

Another name to remember is Thomas Aquinas. He was the most important theologian of the middle ages (13th century). Aquinas was a mixed bag, but his ideas on this question became the foundation of the Catholic doctrine of salvation that the Reformers were responding to and which still continues today. Aquinas said that God infuses a person with grace, then man does good works in cooperation with this grace, and God grants salvation on the basis of these good works. His view of the sacraments was also crucial to Catholic doctrine.

## 4. Luther / Calvin

Then along came Martin Luther and the Reformers in the 16th century. We have done whole classes on the history of the Reformation, and that is a worthwhile exercise, but that's not what we're doing today. Luther and the other reformers recaptured the biblical truth that we are saved by faith alone, not by a combination of faith and works.

The central theological battle during the Reformation was over this question: does God save sinners by a free gift of grace, or do we contribute to our salvation through a complicated system of rituals and sacraments? The Reformers weren't against the sacraments. They were against the idea that your works had anything to do with God's decision to save you.

Romans 1:16-17 was a critical passage for Luther-

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” (Romans 1:16-17)

Luther had been taught that the righteousness of God was the righteousness that we achieved by our good works in cooperation with the grace of God. What he realized was that the righteousness of God is the righteousness that is given to us as a free gift, to be received by faith.

Romans 3:24 says that we are “justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forth as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

Phil discussed some of the other Reformers last week, so we’ll move on.

## 5. Arminianism

Almost 100 years after Luther, a new iteration of this old debate was stirred up, which was in many ways just a repackaging of the 5th/6th century debate over semi-pelagianism.

Jacob Arminius was a dutch theologian and a student of Theodore Beza, who was a student of John Calvin. He concluded that the Reformers were mistaken in their view that God unconditionally elected those who will be saved. This caused enough of a stir that a national synod (council) was called to examine his views. It was called the Synod of Dort. Arminius died before the synod, but his followers summarized his teaching in five points, which were called the “Five Articles of Remonstrance.”

a. These were the five points:

i. God elects or condemns on the basis of foreseen faith or unbelief

1. This is a common way of trying to explain what the Bible says about “predestination” if you reject the Reformed position. The idea is that God sits outside of time (which is absolutely true), so when God created the world, he looked into the future and saw who would choose to believe the gospel and who would not. And it was those people who he foresaw would have faith that he elected (or predestined) for salvation. So election is on the basis of foreseen faith.
2. We (along with the rest of the Reformed world) explicitly reject this in our confession.

ii. God died for all people, but only those who believe are saved

1. The death of Jesus covers the whole world. It secured the possibility of salvation for everyone, but it did not actually

guarantee anyone's salvation. His death only becomes effective for you when you believe.

- iii. Man is so depraved that God's grace is necessary for faith or good works
  - 1. Up to man to either accept or reject this offer of grace
- iv. The grace of God can be effectively resisted
  - 1. Again, God's grace is extended to all, but it is up to the individual to either receive it or reject it.
- v. It is possible for the believer to lose his faith, and thereby fall away and lose his salvation.

The synod rejected the Arminian five points, and drafted their own five point response, which has now come to be called the five points of Calvinism. That's what we're here to discuss, but I'll list them off together so that you get a sense for the contrast.

- b. The five points of Calvinism are:
  - i. God, before the foundation of the world, chose whom he would save, completely of his own free will, not based on anything in us or done by us. In other words, not conditional upon anything we did. (Unconditional election)
  - ii. The death of Christ accomplished exactly what it was intended to accomplish, no more, no less. To state it negatively, the death of Christ only covers those whom God has chosen for salvation, and who as a result of his choosing, respond to him in faith. (Limited/particular atonement)
  - iii. Man is so corrupted by sin that he is completely unable to take even one step toward God unless God changes his heart and draws him to himself. (Total depravity, total inability)
  - iv. Man cannot resist the will of God. When God changes a person's heart, he changes their desire, and frees them to choose the thing that they were created for. (Irresistible grace, effectual grace)
  - v. Preservation of the Saints (Perseverance of the Saints). The truly elect will be kept and preserved by God to the end of time.

The five points were reordered and given the mnemonic "TULIP." It's important to say that there's nothing magical about the five points. Calvin never formulated his theology this way. We shouldn't put too much emphasis on the "five points." It's just a convenient way of summarizing the reformed teaching on salvation. But also, don't be apologetic about it. We admire Calvin and Luther and the other reformers. And what Phil said last week is true for me also, I'm happy to wear the badge of a Calvinist. But the danger is that you start to care too much about Calvinism or about being able to neatly systematize your doctrine. There's nothing wrong with creating systems. That's what we do when we write systematic theology books,

which are extremely useful. But my goal is to convince you (or reassure you) that the Reformed worldview is the Biblical worldview. Spurgeon said that Calvinism is just a nickname for biblical Christianity. We are people of the Bible. I believe that what we're talking about today is true because I believe it's what the Bible teaches.

We're going to look at this from two different angles, and those two angles are going to coincide with the first two of the five points. First I want to show that God is completely sovereign in our salvation, because God is sovereign in absolutely everything. This will touch on the idea of unconditional election. Then I want to show that this is very good news, because the Bible teaches that man can contribute nothing at all toward his own salvation, not even the first step. That will touch on the doctrine of "total depravity."

First, here's what you need to understand: this debate comes down to one issue. Does God save sinners, or does he make it possible for sinners to save themselves? Is salvation a work of God, from start to finish, or is it a cooperative effort between God and man? Here are a couple of fancy terms for you: is salvation monergistic or synergistic? Pelagianism, semi-pelagianism, Catholicism, and Arminianism all make the same fundamental mistake. They all teach that salvation is a cooperative effort - that's what "synergistic" means. The semi-pelagian and Arminian view is that God extends the hand of salvation to everyone, and it's up to man to reach out and take it. The deciding factor in who will be saved is ultimately the will of the individual. The Catholics, on the other hand, teach that God extends grace to certain sinners to get them started, but that our obedience then becomes the grounds on which God grants us life. It's cooperative in a different way.

The reformed position, which is what we believe, (I, the elders, the SOF) is that God saves sinners, completely and entirely of his own free will and action (that's "monergism"). We absolutely believe that people act and choose. God accomplishes his purpose through people and through means. But when you chase the chain of causes back to the beginning, and ask what is the root cause of our salvation, it's the will of God, not the will of man.

J.I Packer wrote what is now a famous essay in defense of Reformed theology. It's actually the introduction to John Owen's book, "The Death of Death." When I was thinking about what to say in this class, I was tempted to just stand up here and read the essay to you - it's that good. And if you're only going to read one thing on this topic after today (other than the book of Romans), it should be that essay. But in it he makes the point that Calvinism is really just about one idea:

"This is the one point of Calvinistic soteriology which the 'five points' are concerned to establish and Arminianism in all its forms to deny: namely, that sinners do not save themselves in any sense at all, but that salvation, first to last, whole and entire, past, present and future, is of the Lord, to whom be glory for ever; amen." (J.I. Packer)

So I hope you see the point. God saves sinners. Sinners do not save themselves.

Now that the two positions are defined, let's ask again, why does it matter? We're all good Protestants here. We believe that we're saved by faith and not works. Why do we have to quibble about this?

First, I hope you see that these are two very different conceptions being presented about what kind of God it is what we serve. And also two very different conceptions of the gospel. In that same essay, Packer poignantly describes the difference. Speaking about what he calls the "new gospel" (although we've seen that it's not actually new), he says, if that account is true:

Now we have to read [the gracious invitations of Christ in the gospel] not as expressions of the tender patience of a might sovereign, but as the pathetic pleadings of impotent desire; and so the enthroned Lord is suddenly metamorphosed into a weak, futile figure, tapping forlornly at the door of the human heart, which he is powerless to open. This is a shameful dishonor to the Christ of the New Testament.

And in another place:

Now, here are two coherent interpretations of the biblical gospel, which stand in evident opposition to each other. The difference between them is not primarily one of emphasis, but of content. One proclaims a God who saves; the other speaks of a God who enables man to save himself. One view presents the three great acts of the Holy Trinity for the recovering of lost mankind - election by the Father, redemption by the Son, calling by the Spirit - as directed towards the same persons, and as securing their salvation infallibly. The other view gives each act a different reference (the objects of redemption being all mankind, of calling, those who hear the gospel, and of election, those hearers who respond), and denies that any man's salvation is secured by any of them. The two theologies thus conceive the plan of salvation in quite different terms. One makes salvation depend on the work of God, the other on a work of man; one regards faith as part of God's gift of salvation, the other as man's own contribution to salvation; one gives all the glory of saving believers to God, the other divides the praise between God, who, so to speak, built the machinery of salvation, and man, who by believing operated it.

So yes, we Protestants all believe that we're saved by faith and not works. But the point of the biblical truth that we are saved by faith is that God gets all of the credit, and we have nothing to boast about. Ephesians 2:8-9 says "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." We can quibble with our Arminian brothers about whether "gift" refers to faith or to grace, but the point is clear. It's not your own doing. The whole thing is a gift of God, from start to finish, so that no one can boast. God gets all of the credit. Phil told us last week about one of the pillars of Reformed theology is "Soli Deo Gloria" - to God alone be the glory. But if God just provides the possibility of salvation, and the deciding point - the faith that's required - is left

to you to contribute on your own, then you very much have something to boast about. If the fundamental reason why you are in heaven and that other guy isn't is because you believed and he didn't, then you deserve some of the credit. And that's actually what faith is - a recognition that you are helpless before God and you don't deserve any of the credit.

We believe that God gets all of the glory because our salvation, from first to last, is a gift from him. He is completely sovereign in the matter of our salvation.

## The Sovereignty of God in All Things

Why do we believe that? Let's go back to the beginning. We believe that God is sovereign in our salvation because we believe that God is sovereign in absolutely everything. We believe this because this is that the Bible teaches.

Psalm 115:3 - Our God is in the heavens, he does all that he pleases.

Psalm 135:6 - Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.

Daniel 4:35 - All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"

Isaiah 45:7 -

I form light and create darkness;  
I make well-being and create calamity;  
I am the Lord, who does all these things.

1 Chronicles 29:11 -

Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all.

A.W. Pink said, "To say that God is sovereign is to declare that God is God." To be sovereign is part of what it means to be God. If God is not sovereign - in control - then he is not God. He is the "I am." He is the one who exists. Everything else only exists because it is his will to bring it into existence.

Hebrews 1:4 - "he upholds the universe by the word of his power."

Job 12:10 - “In his hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind.”

Colossians 1:16-17 -

“For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

The non-Reformed person will say, “Yes, God has the power to do whatever he pleases, but he chooses to give up some of that power for the sake of human freedom.” That seems plausible, at first, but that’s not what the Bible teaches. God is in control, even over the human heart.

Proverbs 21:1 -

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord;  
he turns it wherever he will.

The Bible is full of examples where God does just that.

Pharaoh (Exodus 9:12) -

“But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had spoken to Moses”

Sihon, King of Heshbon (Deuteronomy 2:30) -

But Sihon king of Heshbon was not willing for us to pass through his land; for the Lord your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, in order to hand him over to you, as he is today.

Not just kings:

Isaiah 63:17 -

Why, Lord, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you?

Philippians 2:13 -

“It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

We can think, also, about two very important stories in this discussion. One is the story of Joseph. Joseph’s brothers made the decision to sell Joseph into slavery. But at the end of the story he told them:

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. (Genesis 50:20)

Most importantly of all, what of the decision of Herod and Pontius Pilot to crucify Jesus? Peter says in Acts 4

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. (Acts 4:27-28)

God is sovereign even over human decisions. And the more you think about it, how could he not be? Does it make any sense to say that God is in control of the course of human history, but not over human action? History happens through human decisions. It doesn't make any sense to say that God is sovereign over history, except for the parts that involve human choices? That's incoherent. And also, how terrifying would that be? What good is it to know that God is sovereign over the sparrows and the oceans, if he isn't sovereign over the next conflict that you have with your neighbor?

But that's not what the Bible teaches. God is sovereign, even over the human heart. There are various ideas out there that try to reconcile this tension. How can God be sovereign and still preserve human freedom. In my mind, everything hinges on what you mean by "freedom." Daniel is going to do an entire class in a couple of weeks on God's sovereignty and human responsibility, so I won't linger here. But fundamentally, at the very bottom, the answer to all of the hard questions about the sovereignty of God comes down to this. He is Lord. He owns the world. He gets to do with it as he pleases. He owns you. He gets to do with you as he pleases. Paul says in Romans 9 that you are the pot, he is the potter. The pot doesn't have a say in what the potter does with the pot.

In one sense, that's the end of the story. God is the Lord. Tremble and bow down before him. But of course that isn't the whole story. If we had to stop there, we wouldn't have much reason for hope. Fortunately God doesn't stop there. His purpose includes not just a raw demonstration of power, but the salvation of a people. He doesn't just harden hearts, he also softens them. In Acts 16 we read:

One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. (Acts 16:14)

And in Ezekiel 36

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new

spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

## The Sovereignty of God in Salvation

From the beginning, God has chosen to save a people for himself, to be objects of his blessing and favor, as a demonstration of his mercy and kindness and fatherly love. Because God is sovereign, that choice is an act of his free will. It’s an act of God, from beginning to end. The choice was not conditioned on anything that we did. For that reason we call it “unconditional election.” That’s the “U” in “TULIP.” There are conditions attached to being a part of God’s people, for sure. But God’s choice to save is for no reason other than his own good pleasure. It is unconditional. Let’s go back to the scripture. Many of these will be familiar to you.

In the Old Testament God chose a people for himself in a way that had nothing to do with the worthiness of the people.

The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 7:6-8)

- Notice that the reasons given for God’s choosing of Israel are all within God (He loves you, and is keeping his oath that he swore to your fathers). Not because you were more impressive than the other nations - you weren’t.

This principle still applies in the New Testament. Let’s look at some New Testament passages.

Ephesians 1:3-5,11

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will [ ... ] In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.

Notice a few things:

- When did the choosing take place? “Before the foundation of the world.” In other words, before time even began, when all that existed was the triune God in fellowship with himself. When there was no one to consult except himself.
- What is the grounds for his choosing? Twice it says “according to the purpose (or council) of his will.” There is no hint of God looking into the future and seeing our faith or good works. In fact, it says that the *purpose* of his election is that we should be “holy and blameless before him.” That’s the result of his choice. But the reason for his choice was nothing more than the purpose of his will.
- “In love” - Don’t let the doctrine of predestination be a cold and heartless thing in your mind. “In love he predestined us for adoption as sons.”

Acts 13:48

When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and all who had been appointed to eternal life believed.

- Notice that God’s “appointing”, or decree, is the cause. Believing is the consequence. The appointing comes first, not just in time, but logically. Who believed? Those “who had been appointed to eternal life.” Do you have to believe in order to receive eternal life? Yes! But where does your belief come from? We all have a testimony about how we came to believe. My parents raised me as a Christian and that’s why I believe. Or someone spoke the gospel to me and I was convicted, and that’s why I believe. Or something dramatic happened that drove me to Christ, and that’s why I believe. All of that can be true. But behind it all, at the root of the matter, it was the decree of God that you would believe and be saved.

2 Thessalonians 2:13

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.

- Notice again the timing as well as the logical progression. God has chosen you for salvation, from the beginning. He chose you for salvation, *through* sanctification and faith. God’s choice comes first. Faith and sanctification are the result. Faith is the means by which God saves you, not the grounds. Please understand that. Your faith is not the reason why God saves you. The reason why God saves you is the obedience, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which become yours when you are united to him through faith. And the first cause, the very beginning, of all of it is the free choice of God, the creator.

There are many others that we could talk about, but for time's sake we'll just look at one more

Romans 9 is perhaps the clearest statement of God's sovereignty in the Bible

9 For this is what the promise said: "About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son." 10 And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, 11 though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— 12 she was told, "The older will serve the younger." 13 As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

14 What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! 15 For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." 16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion,[b] but on God, who has mercy. 17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." 18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

19 You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" 20 But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" 21 Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

- There are whole series' of sermons on this passage, but a few things to notice
- Paul goes out of his way to make the show that God's choice to call Jacob and not Esau had nothing to do with anything that either of them had done. "Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad ... not because of works but because of him who calls, she was told, the older will serve the younger." Sometimes Paul juxtaposes works with faith to make a point about how we come to be justified. In this passage, that's not Paul's point. He doesn't say, "not because of works, but because of faith." He says, "not because of works, but because of him who calls." In other words, not because of them, but because of God.
- For what reason was he chosen? "- in order that God's purpose of election might continue." That's the driving force behind the entire history of the world - the purpose of God.
- Then Paul engages directly with the argument that we mentioned at the beginning, "how can God judge if he's the one determines the choices of men? Doesn't that make him

unjust?” The Bible doesn’t really seem all that concerned with this question, but Paul does address it here. His response is instructive. He doesn’t qualify or soften his claim. Instead he doubles down. “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.” He says it “does not depend on human will or exertion.” It couldn’t be more clear. Hear it again. Paul says that who God has mercy on does not depend on human will, or exertion, but on the will of God. End of story.

- But how can he find fault? Who can resist his will? The answer is implied, “no one can resist his will.” But again Paul doubles down. “Who are you to answer back to God. Doesn’t the potter have the right to make whatever he pleases out of the clay, some for honorable use, and some for dishonorable?”
- This is a rather stunning, unapologetic defense of the sovereignty of God. Even we Reformed folks read this and we wish Paul would give us a more intellectually satisfying answer to this age-old question. But this is the answer that God gave us. “Who are you to answer back to God?” Let’s humble ourselves before our maker. We could linger here all morning, but we have to move on.
- When Reformed theologians talk about “unconditional election,” this is what we mean. God saves sinners, sinners do not save themselves in any sense whatsoever. God chooses a people for himself, by his own good pleasure, and it is not dependent on anything that we contribute.

And this is very good news, because the Bible is clear on another important point.

## Total Depravity

That is that we sinners have nothing to contribute to God. This is what we mean by “total depravity,” which is the “T” in “TULIP.” We are completely dead in our sins until God makes us alive in Christ. It’s a bleak picture. Sin and death are in our very nature. When Adam sinned in the garden, something changed. Human nature changed. Adam was created with a perfect, sinless nature. That doesn’t mean that Adam could sail along on his own without help from God. God was still sovereign before the fall. But it means that Adam’s nature wasn’t tainted by sin. He wasn’t inclined to sin the way we are. But Adam’s disobedience brought sin into the world, and with it came death - physical and spiritual. Romans 5:12 says, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.” Then later he says that “one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men,” and that “by one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners.” When Adam sinned, human nature became tainted. Because of that, all of our thoughts and all of our deeds are naturally tainted. Isaiah says that “our righteousness is like filthy rags.” It’s our own sin that taints us, but we have a natural inclination toward sin and away from the things of God. We are spiritually dead. Ephesians 2:1 says

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world ...

Spiritually dead. Not sick, or hobbled, but dead in our trespasses and sins. Not “mostly dead” like Wesley in “The Princess Bride,” but completely dead. To be spiritually dead means that you have no desire for spiritual things, things that pertain to God.

1 Corinthians 2:14 - The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things ...”

Now, who is the natural person and who is the spiritual person? Paul says later in the Ephesians 2, speaking to believers, that we “were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” The “natural person” refers to everyone, in their natural state before God saves and changes them. That includes us. We were all “natural people.” Do you see the problem with the view that says that God extends his hand to everyone in the same way, and it is up to the will of the sinner to make the determining choice? It makes it the responsibility of the natural person to discern the spiritual offer and accept it. But Paul says very clearly that he does *not* accept the things of God. The things of God are folly to him. He doesn’t understand them and he doesn’t accept them. Until God changes a person’s heart, he cannot, and will not, accept the things of God.

We are not neutral, and we are not natural seekers of God. Romans 3 is one of the strongest passages on the state of fallen man. Paul says:

For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: “No one is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

- That’s pretty unequivocal. All are under the power of sin. It’s something you’re born with. The sin that you are judged for is your own sin, not Adam’s. But you are born under the power of sin. We all know from experience that you don’t have to teach a child to be selfish, or to lash out in anger. It comes very naturally.
- He says emphatically, “No one is righteous, no one understands, no one seeks for God.” “No one does good, not even one.”

This is what we mean by “total depravity.” Some people call it “total inability,” which is fine and captures something true - which is that we are total unable to accomplish anything

toward our own salvation. We are helpless before God. But “total inability” makes it sound morally neutral. Paul says that we are not morally neutral. Sin is in our nature.

You might think that “Total depravity” sounds extreme. You’re thinking, “Really? *Total* depravity? I know lots of non-Christians who live more or less moral lives.” A couple of things to say about that:

- Total depravity doesn’t mean “as bad as possible.” It means “everything is tainted.” Nothing is pure. “Our righteousness is like filthy rags,” as Isaiah said.
- The heart is what determines whether an act is righteous. Is it done in service and gratitude to God? Let’s say two neighbors show up at your house to help you clean up after a storm. One neighbor is a Christian and the other is not. From the outside, they both did a righteous deed, helping a neighbor in need. But they aren’t the same. You actually cannot truly love your neighbor (in a God-honoring way) without love for God. That’s because anything that is not motivated ultimately by love for God is a form of idolatry.
  - 1 John 5:2 - “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.”

So remember that appearances can be deceiving-

- 1 Samuel 16:7 - “The Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

So, the point is that until God reaches down and quickens a person’s spirit, makes them alive and changes their heart, we are totally unable to offer anything to God, or even to respond to him in faith.

A common objection that you’ll hear is this: doesn’t the command imply an ability? How can God command us to do something that we don’t have the ability to do?

- To that I ask, when Jesus spoke to Lazarus and commanded him, “Lazarus, come forth,” did Lazarus have the ability to obey? Of course not. Dead men don’t reach out and take the hand that is extended to them. The Lord gives us the power to obey. It is a gift, just like everything else that you have. It’s all a gift. Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “What do you have that you did not receive?” It’s a rhetorical question. The answer is, “Nothing.” It’s all a gift.

This is why the sovereignty of God is, in fact, very good news. Calvinists have a historical reputation for for dour and grouchy. Calvinists should be the happiest people on earth. We believe in a God who saves sinners. And he does it all, from first to last. It’s all a gift.

Let's finish with a quote from Martin Luther. This is from his book, "The Bondage of the Will."

I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want "free-will" to be given me nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavor after salvation; not merely because in face of so many dangers, and adversities and assaults of devils, I could not stand my ground, [...] but because even were there no dangers, adversities, or devils, I should still be forced to labor with no guarantee of success, and to beat my fists at the air. If I lived and worked to all eternity, my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God. Whatever work I had done, there would still be a nagging doubt as to whether it pleased God, or whether he required something more. The experience of all who seek righteousness by works proves that; and I learned it well enough myself over a period of many years, to my own great hurt.

But 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. "No one," he says, "shall pluck them out of my hand, because my Father who gave them to me is greater than all. (Luther, The Bondage of the Will)