

SOTERIOLOGY (97)

- 9) James clearly stated that it was God's will that caused us to be born again (James 1:18).
- 10) John said exactly the same thing that James said—God's will determined who would be spiritually born again (John 1:13).
- 11) Luke, who records the words of Jesus Christ, also says exactly the same thing, namely, it is God's will that determines who will come to Christ and be saved (Luke 10:21-22).

If we accept the statements of the Bible and choose to believe them rather than human reason or philosophical speculation, we must conclude that man, according to the Scriptures, is saved by the will of God, not by his own will.

It seems from a study of Church history that the early church didn't question this truth. For example, somewhere near the year A.D. 100, a letter was written from the Church of Rome to the Church of Corinth. This letter was accepted and read in the church. The famous letter is now known as II Clement. In this letter we get several glimpses of the theological beliefs of those living shortly after the apostles had died. Pertaining to the matter of whether salvation is by God's will or man's will, the following excerpt gives us a clear perspective of what the early church believed:

“What repayment, then, shall we give to Him, or what fruit worthy of what He has given to us? And how many blessings do we owe Him? For He has given us the light; as a father He has called us sons; He saved us when we were perishing. What praise, then, shall we give Him, or what repayment in return for what we have received? Our minds were blinded, and we worshipped stones and wood and gold and silver and brass, the works of men; indeed, our whole life was nothing else but death. So while we were thus wrapped in darkness and our vision was filled with this thick mist, we recovered our sight, by His will laying aside the cloud wrapped around us. For He had mercy upon us and in His compassion He saved us when we had no hope of salvation except that which comes from Him, and even though he had seen in us much deception and destruction. For He called us when we did not exist, and out of nothing He willed us into being” (J. B. Lightfoot & J. R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 68).

From this we can see that two key churches—Rome and Corinth, both had a perspective of doctrine that believed they had been saved by the will of God, not by their own will.

QUESTION #35 – Does the Bible teach that an unsaved person will use his will to choose to be right with God?

It is a tragedy that many who form theological opinions on this critical issue of salvation, never stop to ask whether or not the Bible gives us insight into this matter. When we search the Scriptures, what we discover is that the Bible specifically points out that no unsaved person will ever choose God, in and of himself. An unsaved person will make choices based upon his unsaved nature, which is dark, depraved and alienated from God.

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- 1) Jesus Christ specifically said that He is the one who gives eternal life to whomever He wills and that man, left to himself, is unwilling to come to Him (John 5:21, 40).
- 2) Paul specifically said, “there is NONE who understands, there is NONE who seeks for God” (Rom. 3:11).
- 3) Paul said that a mind, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, is hostile toward God and not even capable of submitting to God (Rom. 8:7).
- 4) Paul said that the natural man “does not accept” and “cannot understand” spiritual things that pertain to God (I Cor. 2:14).
- 5) Paul said that salvation, including faith, is a “gift of God” (Eph. 2:8).

Perhaps one of the best glimpses we get of how sinful humanity uses its will is in the first scriptural glimpse we get of sin. In Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve sinned, we read these words: “And they heard the sound of the LORD God among the trees of the garden (Gen. 3:8). In the aftermath of their sin, Adam and Eve did not use their will to choose God, they used their will to run from God and hide from God. We would do well to remind ourselves that these were two people who originally did not have a sin nature coloring their decisions. But even then they did not use their will to choose to do what was right and choose to be right with God.

The biblical record is very clear that no unsaved person, left to himself and left to his own will, will ever choose to be right with God. Being saved is a unique work of God and He gets the glory for it.

QUESTION #36 – Does the Bible teach that an unsaved person is accountable and responsible for decisions he made with his will?

Again, if the biblical record is examined, the answer to this question is an emphatic Yes !

There is no question that God holds the unsaved responsible and accountable for their actions and their decisions (i.e. Matt. 23:32-25; Rom. 12:17-19).

When it comes to the matter of salvation, it is demanded by God that a man admit and acknowledge what is rationally, morally and spiritually true; namely, he has used his will to sin against God. Man is responsible and accountable to acknowledge to God that he is a sinner and in view of this acknowledgement to cry out to God for His mercy (Luke 18:13-14).

Really, the primary responsibility of an unsaved person is to admit his inability to God. He must admit the truth; namely, he has sinned. Every man or woman has the ability to see that he/she has sinned against God. It does not take a brilliant theologian to figure out that he has not measured up to all the righteous standards of God, His Word and His Law (Ex. 20:17).

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The responsibility of man lies in him honestly admitting the truth of what he really is—a sinner who is without hope, in and of himself. In this admission he must be willing to cry out to God for His mercy, found in Jesus Christ (Luke 18:13-14). This is the responsibility of man.

Every person who has ever done this will testify that at the precise moment of this decision, he viewed it as his decision and his choice. But as we search the Scriptures, what we learn is that it was the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, that convicted the sinner so that he would acknowledge this truth (John 16:7-11). As near as we may determine, it is the perception that it is our choice and decision that makes us accountable in this mysterious matter.

Arthur Pink gives an interesting illustration of the responsibility of man in the matter of salvation. He writes:

“Suppose, I had slipped on the icy pavement, late at night, and had broken my hip. I am unable to arise; if I remain on the ground, I must freeze to death. What, then, ought I to do? If I am determined to perish, I shall lie there silent—but I shall be to blame for such a course. If I am anxious to be rescued, I shall lift up my voice and cry for help. So the sinner, though unable of himself to rise and take the first step toward Christ, is responsible to cry to God, and if he does (from the heart), there is a Deliverer. But if the sinner refuses to cry unto the Lord, if he is determined to perish, then his blood is on his own head, and his ‘damnation is just’ (Rom. 3:8)” (Arthur Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, pp. 160-161).

Every time man sins, he is responsible and accountable to God. In fact, the Scriptures tell us that he is “storing up wrath for himself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Rom. 2:5).

Since “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” all people have used their own wills time and time again in disobedience to God’s righteous standards. Every person will be held accountable for his personal choices and decisions to sin against God. If one were to dare suggest that he has not used his will this way, God is very clear to point out that He will call up His law and “shut every mouth” (Rom. 3:19).

The responsibility of lost man is to simply admit what is true—he is a sinner who, in and of himself, has no hope of being saved. The one who cries to God—“God be merciful unto me a sinner” is one who will be saved.

If a man refuses to acknowledge truth about himself, God’s sovereign will will be accomplished. Such a person will wind up being one of the non-elect who is a “vessel of wrath prepared for destruction” (Rom 9:22).

While hunting in the Teton National Forest, through a set of unusual circumstances I was able to talk at length with a forest service officer of the Teton National Forest. He informed me that an older man had been hunting in the Teton Wilderness area and they were searching for him. The assumption was he had been killed by a grizzly bear and they were looking for his remains.

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What had really happened was this man had gone hunting and had fallen and broken his leg and he was helpless, in and of himself, to move or get out of his situation. For five days this man laid in the wilderness thinking he was going to die, when he was found. The search and rescue team searched and searched for him and finally tracked him down and he was saved.

In and of himself, there was nothing he could do. He was at the total mercy of the sovereignty and wisdom of the search and rescue team. Really, when he was discovered he was nearly unconscious. He couldn't even cry for help, he couldn't say thank you; he was saved by nothing he could even humanly do. So it is with our salvation. We have fallen into sin and we have been broken by unrighteousness. In and of ourselves, we have no hope. But the Sovereign, Gracious God, in all of His wisdom and power, tracked us down and He saved us. To quote a famous piece of forensic rhetoric—we did not, would not and could not save ourselves. Our responsibility, as we perceive it, is to cry for help. But the truth is we won't cry for help until the Spirit has convicted us that we need help and that we are lost.

Those of us who know Jesus Christ have the responsibility to present the Gospel of God's grace to the whole world. We do not know who the elect are or who God will sovereignly save. It is our responsibility to present this message to all with whom we have opportunity. It is our job to plant and water the truth of the grace of God, but any increase in the family of God is God's sovereign work. We have the greatest message in all of the world, the message of God's saving grace and we have the greatest power in all the world, the power of God's sovereignty. We have a God who "does whatever He pleases" (Psalm 115:3) and whose sovereignty "rules over all" (Psalm 103:19). Thank God that He conducts a spiritual search and rescue for many who are lost. If He has tracked you down, thank Him, praise Him and give Him the glory for He found you; you didn't find Him.

Perhaps no man had such a proper theological grasp of this issue as Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer. His words merit reflection:

"When exercising his will, man is conscious only of his freedom of action. He determines his course by circumstances, but God is the author of circumstances. Man is impelled by emotions, but God is able to originate and to control every human emotion. Man prides himself that he is governed by experienced judgment, but God is able to foster each and every thought or determination of the human mind. God will mold and direct in all secondary causes until His own eternal purpose is realized. How else could He fulfill His covenants which commit Him to the control of the actions and destinies of men to the end of time and into eternity? His election is sure; for whom He predestines, them—not more or less—He calls; and whom He calls, them—not more or less—He justifies; and whom He justifies, them—not more or less—He glorifies. When predestinating, He assumes the responsibility of creating, calling, saving and completing according to His own purpose. In calling He moves those to believe to the saving of their souls, whom He has chosen. In justifying He provides a substitutionary, efficacious Savior by whose death and resurrection He is legally able to place the chief of sinners in as perfect a relation to Himself as that of His own Son.

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And in glorifying He perfects all that infinite love has designed. The precise number and the same individuals—not more or less—that He predestinated. Each one will have believed, have been saved, have been perfected and presented like Christ in glory. Men enter consciously into this great undertaking only at the point of believing, or responding to the efficacious call. Naturally, it seems to them that they, acting in freedom within the restricted sphere of their consciousness, determine everything. Their action is vital, for no link in God's chain can be lacking.

The point where misunderstanding arises is with reference to the fact that, so far as their cognizance serves them, they are certain that they act freely; yet every truly regenerate person will testify that he would not have turned to God apart from that all-important divine drawing of his heart. Divine election is absolute. If this seems to some to be taking things out of the hands of men and committing them into the hands of God, it will at least be conceded that when thus committed to God, things are in better hands and this, after all, is God's own universe in which He has sovereign right to do after the dictates of His own will. It will also be conceded that the sphere of human action, so far as it can mean anything in the sphere of human consciousness, is left in perfect freedom of action. It should be deemed no crime on the part of God that He discloses to His own elect that His sovereign power and purpose are working through and over all human forces and secondary causes" (Vol. 1, pp. 241-242).

QUESTION #37 – What are the major objections to the issue of God's sovereignty in electing people to salvation?

There are certain rationalistic objections that have been offered by those who do not like or accept the biblical doctrine of election. We would like to consider four of the most prominent:

Objection #1 - The respector of persons objection.

This objection basically states that if God analyzes all people and concludes that some deserve to be saved and others don't, He is a respector of persons.

This objection is easily refuted. First, the Bible plainly and clearly states that God is no respector of persons and He does not show partiality (Acts 10:34). In fact, such a mindset is a clear violation of the Law of God, which reveals His character (i.e. Lev. 19:15). So immediately based on Scripture, we reject the idea that God is a respector of persons.

We must realize that when it comes to salvation, no human being deserves to be saved. As Romans 3:23 clearly reminds us, all have sinned and all have fallen short of the glory of God. So nothing that was done by a sinful human being made God respect him to the point He saved him.

Salvation is always a pure act of grace. This objection makes salvation an issue of justice. This objection assumes that God is not just because He respects certain people enough to save them and He doesn't respect the rest enough to save them.

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But the argument misses the point that saving a soul is not an issue of justice, it is an issue of pure grace.

If God made salvation an issue of justice, He would not save anyone, for all deserve hell. God would be perfectly just if He sent every human being to hell for his sins.

Objection #2 - The love of God objection.

This objection basically reasons that God could not love all people if He did not choose to save all people. This view argues that God cannot elect some and not elect others and still love all people.

The Bible reveals that God does love the world and everyone in it. One of the most famous passages of Scripture clearly reveals this—John 3:16. The problem with this objection is that it does not understand God's love. God's love for the world is demonstrated in Him permitting His only begotten Son to die on a cross. God demonstrated His love in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). Furthermore, what must always be realized is that God's love does not ever negate God's attributes of God's justice and holiness. These attributes also equally make God, God. God's love is the ultimate demonstration of universal love. It was not some emotional, irrational reaction, but it was a carefully and highly calculated demonstration.

God, in His love, can provide salvation for all; but God, in His holiness and justice cannot save all. The real problem of the election of God and the love of God is in our finite ability to humanly reason all of this. The problem is not with what God has said in His Word. He says He loves the world and He says He has mercy on whomever He wants. God has revealed He loves the world and He has also revealed He will not save everyone in the world. Both facts are true and do not diminish God's character.

We must always remember that God's love is connected to Christ's cross. Those who are not brought to the cross are not under the love of God; they are under the wrath of God (i.e. Rom. 1:18; 2:5; John 3:18). God's love could not be demonstrated at any greater level than when His Son went to the cross. Regardless of the doctrine of election, every mouth is able to testify that "God loved the world."

Objection #3 - The sin of man objection.

Some have objected to God's sovereignty by reasoning that if God does not elect some, then He is actually involved in the process of determining that men sin and remain in sin. This argument gets dangerously close to blaming God for man's sin.

The Bible is very clear that God is not the author of sin (James 1:13-15). This passage is also clear that man is responsible for his own sin.

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The fact that God saves a person and then begins a work in the life to transform him clearly proves that it is God who promotes holiness.

No one can proudly blame God for man's sin, but we certainly can humbly thank God for man's salvation. Salvation is a gift of God that completely delivers a person from the sin that he himself personally chose to commit. Those who are abandoned by God and left to their sin will ultimately wind up bringing glory to God by demonstrating He has power to stamp out all evil (Prov. 16:4; Rom. 9:22).

Objection #4 - The pride of man objection.

This objection basically suggests that if God elects certain individuals to salvation, it promotes pride in those who think they are the elect. This view reasons that the elect are puffed up because they are elect.

We may suppose that it is possible for someone to think proudly of his election. Such a person is obviously thinking in a manner contrary to the Word of God. The doctrine of election is a doctrine that promotes humility, not pride. Truth is those who deny election promote pride for they proudly deny a precious doctrine God has revealed.

Any person who truly realizes the Holy God of this universe has saved him is one who is humbled by this reality. Any person who would exalt himself as one of the elect and flaunt this fact in the face of others has, as Dr. Strong suggests, "reason to question their election" (Vol. 3, p. 176).

The words of Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer are worth considering:

"The doctrine of election is not without its difficulties—precisely such, indeed, as are normal when the finite mind assays to trace the paths of infinity. Within his own consciousness, man recognizes little outside his own power of determination; however, in the end and regardless of the means by which man has reached his destiny, it will be that destiny which was not only foreseen, but was divinely purposed. Such must be the conviction of every devout soul that contemplates the obvious truth, that the Creator is as resourceful in executing His purposes as He is in originating them" (Vol. 3, pp. 175-176).

QUESTION #38 – For whom did Christ die?

The fact of election has caused students of the Bible to struggle with another theological issue, namely, for whom did Christ die? Since God reveals that He does elect some to salvation, the debate over the value of Christ's death becomes a legitimate topic of theological study.

The essence of the debate can be broken down into three questions: