

Salvation: God's Pursuit of Us
Part Three

The Order of Salvation, Calling, Irresistible Grace, Regeneration

The Order of Salvation

Calvinistic *ordo salutis*

Calling: External (universal / resistible)
Internal (limited / efficacious)

↓

Regeneration / New Birth
(passive / monergistic)

↓

Conversion: Faith & Repentance
↓
The Gifts of God

↓

Justification

↓

Adoption

↓

Sanctification

(perseverance assured)

↓

Glorification

Arminian *ordo salutis*

Prevenient Grace
(universal / resistible)

↓

Calling: External (universal / resistible)

↓

Conversion: Faith & Repentance
↓
Freedom of the Will

↓

Regeneration
(active / synergistic)

↓

Justification

↓

Adoption

↓

Sanctification

(apostasy possible)

↓

Glorification

Divine Calling

We begin with what theologians refer to as the divine "call" of the gospel. In Matthew 22:14, we read, "For many are called, but few are chosen." What this means is that whereas everyone is called by God externally in that the gospel is preached to all, only the elect are called by God internally in that they alone are enabled to respond in saving faith.

We see much the same thing in 1 Thessalonians 1:5, in which Paul declares that his gospel did not come to the Thessalonians "in word only but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." Conceivably then, the gospel may indeed come to many in word only, that is to say, externally. They hear it with the ear but there is no response of faith in the heart. To others, the elect, the gospel comes not only in word but also in such a way that the Holy Spirit powerfully and efficaciously effects a saving response.

Although the Bible does not use the word "external" with reference to a call of God, the fact that God issues an invitation which is universal, yet ultimately ineffective, justifies its employment in our discussion. The external call may therefore be defined as the presentation of the gospel and offer of salvation to all sinners. This call or invitation to come to Christ to receive the forgiveness of sins is indiscriminate, which is to say it is not restricted to any one group, age, class, or nation.

- *The external call, therefore, is simply the command of God that all men everywhere should repent and believe in order that they might be saved (see Matt. 11:28; 28:19; Luke 24:47; John 16:7-8; Acts 17:30; Rev. 22:17). This call, because it is external only, may be resisted and refused (see especially Acts 7:51; John 16:7-11).*
- *The "internal" call, on the other hand, may be defined as that summons by which God not only invites a woman externally in the gospel, but also internally enables her to respond to it. Thus the internal call is, in a sense, the external call with an added dimension. Attendant with the spoken word of the gospel is the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit which irresistibly secures a positive, saving response from the one called.*

What I am saying is that although everyone hears the call of God in the gospel, only the elect are given "spiritual ears" in order that they might make sense of it. Whereas both the elect and non-elect think about what they hear in the gospel, only the elect are given insight and understanding in order that they might recognize its truth. That the elect hear, see, understand, and finally believe the gospel of Jesus Christ is owing ultimately not to any person and his/her free will, but to the sovereign grace of almighty God.

This internal call by which an elect person is drawn to faith is an *effectual* call. In other words, it goes beyond simply presenting the truth of Christianity to the mind; it actually and always issues in a positive response of the mind. *The internal call, because it comes only to the elect, is designed to secure, infallibly and effectively, the saving response which the external call alone could not.*

Although the internal call which comes only to the elect is ultimately efficacious, it is not always immediately efficacious. Many of the elect hear the external call of the gospel for years and resist the summons in persistent, callous unbelief. But eventually, if they are elect, in God's appointed time they will believe. The elect, observes Calvin,

"are gathered into Christ's flock by a call not immediately at birth, and not all at the same time, but according as it pleases God to dispense his grace to them. But before they are gathered unto that supreme Shepherd, they wander scattered in the wilderness common to all; and they do not differ at all from others except that they are protected by God's special mercy from rushing headlong into the final ruin of death" (3.24.10).

Irresistible Grace

See especially **John 6:37-40,44,65**. Is it proper to speak of this call as "irresistible"? Many Calvinists have objected to this adjective. D. A. Carson argues:

"The expression [irresistible grace] is misleading, because it suggests what the theologians themselves usually seek to avoid, viz. the idea that the inevitability of the coming-to-Jesus by those given to Jesus means they do so against their will, squealing and kicking as it were" (185).

In other words, "irresistible grace" is said to imply that the sinner wants to resist but cannot; he is forced against his will to believe what he otherwise would have rejected.

Carson has a point. I concur that perhaps the unwise and overzealous use of this expression might issue in a misunderstanding of biblical Calvinism. However, it must also be noted that all Calvinists concede that inwardly and subjectively, that is, beneath the level of consciousness, the Holy Spirit effects a transformation of the mind and will which inevitably and irresistibly issues in the conscious acquiescence of the person to the truth of the gospel. Prior to this effectual transformation, the person is unwilling to believe. Subsequent to it, he is willing to believe and, in fact, does believe. If God did not at some point make us willing to believe we would forever have remained unwilling and consequently lost. In this sense the grace of effectual calling and regeneration is, properly speaking, irresistible. When we consciously reflect upon and eventually embrace the gospel by faith, we do so willingly, not unwillingly, because antecedent to that decision God in his grace made us willing. This, of course, is what Jesus was referring to in John 6:57: "All that the Father gives me *shall come to me*" (italics added).

This is the glory and miracle of grace, that God, through the Holy Spirit, is able to transform a stubborn, rebellious, and unbelieving will into a passionate, obedient, believing will without violating the integrity of the individual or diminishing the voluntary nature of one's decision to trust Christ for salvation.

Regeneration or the New Birth

This obviously prompts us to ask another question. What precisely is it that the Holy Spirit does in the elect that he does not do in the non-elect? What is it, if anything, that the Holy Spirit does in the elect that elicits the appropriate response to the call issued in the gospel? The answer is **regeneration**. Or to use an expression that everyone today knows, the person is "born again." A person believes the gospel because there has taken place within him/her a radical and spiritually pervasive transformation in which the mind, soul, heart, indeed ones entire personality has been renewed by the Spirit of God.

Who or what is the cause of this radical spiritual transformation that the Bible refers to as "regeneration" or being "born again"? Pelagians understand regeneration to be nothing more than reformation, a mere exchange of one set of habits for another set (achieved, of course, by a free act of will). Since man is not constitutionally depraved, that is, depraved by nature, being at worst the innocent victim of bad examples and other circumstances beyond his control, he does not need re-creation, only redirection.

Arminians believe that regeneration is brought to pass by the divine will and human will working in conjunction with one another. Or if they say that God alone regenerates, he does so only when and because the individual believes by a free act of will, or does not resist the overtures of grace. For example, we are told that "God cannot and to say the same thing - *will not* regenerate a heart that will not admit him. God respects the sovereignty-within-limitations with which he endowed man at creation" (William MacDonald, 86).

Calvinists insist that the sole cause of regeneration or being born again is the will of God. God first sovereignly and efficaciously regenerates, and only in consequence of that do we act. Therefore, the individual is passive in regeneration, neither preparing himself nor making himself receptive to what God will do. Regeneration is a change wrought in us by God, not an autonomous act performed by us for ourselves. Man's status in regard to regeneration is that of a recipient, not a contributor. Man is spiritually, in relation to regeneration, what Lazarus was physically, in relation to resurrection: dead, passive, unable to do anything at all, wholly subject to the will of him who gives life and breath to whomever he desires.

In the doctrine of regeneration we are asserting that beneath and before all positive human response to the gospel, whether faith, repentance, love, or conversion, there is a supernatural, efficacious, and altogether mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. This work of the Spirit is both prior to and the effectual cause of all activity on the part of man. To sum up, the Holy Spirit regenerates a person in order that a person may convert to God.

A 7-Point Summary of the Doctrine of Regeneration

(1) In the doctrine of regeneration we are asserting that beneath and before all positive human response to the gospel, whether faith, repentance, love, or conversion, there is a supernatural, efficacious, and altogether mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. This work of the Spirit is both prior to and the effectual cause of all activity on the part of man. To sum up, the Holy Spirit regenerates a person in order that a person may convert to God.

(2) The doctrine of man's total moral depravity, the bondage of the will, the teaching of Scripture on faith and repentance as God's gifts to his elect, as well as the doctrine of grace, all converge to demand that we understand regeneration to be prior to and therefore the cause of faith (see also Titus 3:5; Jn. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23-25; 1 John 5:1).

(3) According to John 1:11-13, birth into God's family is of a different order from birth into an earthly human family. One does not become a child of God by the same process or as a result of the same causal factors as one becomes a physical child of Abraham.

This text indicates that one does not become a child of God by being "born of bloods" (lit.). The point is that spiritual life is not genetically transmitted! Furthermore, spiritual birth is not "of the will of the flesh." This probably refers to sexual desire. Nor is spiritual birth caused by the "will of man." If these three phrases do not rule out all conceivable human causes in regeneration, the final phrase does. If regeneration is "of God," with no additional comment, then surely it cannot be of anything or anyone else.

(4) Our Lord's words to Nicodemus in John 3:3-8 shed considerable light on the nature of the new birth.

The reference to being born "of water" should be interpreted against the background of the Old Testament in which water was frequently a symbol for purification or cleansing from the pollution of sin (see Exod. 30:20-21; 40:12; Lev. 14:8-9; 15:5-27; Num. 19; 2 Kings 5:10; Ps. 51:2-3; Isa. 1:16; Jer. 33:8; Zech. 13:1). We should note especially Ezek. 36:25-26 – "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. 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." Thus to be born "of water and Spirit" is to be purified from the guilt of sin and inwardly renewed, both of which are wrought in us by the sovereign regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, in saying, "that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (v. 6), Jesus is telling us that human nature is capable of propagating or producing only human nature. It is unable to produce anything that transcends its character as human. Simply put: like produces like. Or better yet: you can't get a spiritual effect from a physical cause.

(5) Among the many words used for regeneration or the new birth in the NT ("to create" [*ktizō*], "to make alive together with" [*suzōopoieō*], "to renew" [*anakainōō*], and "renewal" [*anakainōsis*], and "to beget again" [*anagennaō*]), several are especially worthy of note.

The word "regeneration" (*palingenesis*) is used twice, in Matthew 19:28 where it refers to the consummate renewal or regeneration of the cosmos, and in Titus 3:5 where it refers to the regeneration of the individual. In this latter text, "regeneration" is most likely synonymous with "renewal" (*anakainōsis*). In other words, "to be reborn is to be made anew. At most we can say that the two phrases describe the same transformation from slightly different angles" (James Dunn, *Baptism in the Spirit*, 166).

(6) The principal word for the biblical doctrine of regeneration is "to beget" or "to give birth to" (*gennaō*). It is used 96x in the New Testament, seventy-five of which refer to the physical act of conception or the event of giving birth to a child. Twice Paul uses it metaphorically of his "giving birth" to an individual in the sense of being the human instrument through which God brought that person to faith (1 Cor. 4:15; Philemon 10). It is used three times in a quotation of Psalm 2 of the Father "begetting" the Son (Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5). It is used once in the general sense of "to produce" (2 Tim. 2:23). Our concern is with the fifteen places in which it is used to describe spiritual birth, regeneration, a divine begetting of the individual in consequence of which one lives spiritually. Interestingly, all fifteen occurrences are in the writings of John (John 1:13; 3:3,5,6,7,8; 1 John 2:29; 3:9 [twice]; 4:7; 5:1 [twice], 4,18 [twice]).

(7) The only other word of interest is "to bring forth" or "to beget" (*apokueō*), found in James 1:18 ("Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth . . ."). That James here used this word instead of *gennaō* has struck some as odd in that *apokueō* more properly denotes the role of the female in giving birth and therefore seems inappropriate for God the Father. However, aside from the fact that the word is obviously used metaphorically, the very notion of God "begetting" at all is surprising! Also, James clearly used this particular word in order to maintain a parallel with what he said in 1:15 ("then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth

[*apokuei*] death”). In other words, “from sin comes death; but God is the giver of all, and only, good gifts, and from him comes life” (Sophie Laws, 75).

**Addendum:
The Three Impossibilities**

John 6:37-40,44,65 (see also 17:1-2,6,9,24)

"All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day. . . . No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. . . . For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father."

On several occasions in John's Gospel divine election is described in terms of God the Father giving certain persons to God the Son (6:37, 39; 10:29; 17:1-2,6,9,24). In each of these cases the giving of men to Christ precedes and is the cause of their receiving eternal life. Those who are given to the Son include not only the present company of disciples who believe in Jesus but also the elect of future ages who will come to faith through the gospel. Jesus looks upon them as already his (John 17:20-21; see also John 10:16; Acts 18:10), even though they have not yet believed in his name. They are his because they were given to him by the Father in eternity past.

What is of special importance to us is what Jesus says about how those whom the Father has given to him come to him and whether or not those who come can ever lose their salvation. It will prove helpful to look at this in terms of **three impossibilities**.

The first impossibility. Jesus says that it is morally and spiritually impossible for a person to come to Christ apart from the "drawing" of that person by God the Father (6:44,65). May I strongly emphasize the words *morally* and *spiritually*. The reason people do not come to Christ is not because they lack a will, or a mind, or feelings, or even lack opportunity and occasion. Their not coming to Christ is due to their moral and spiritual *refusal* to do so, a refusal in which *they willingly and freely delight*. If they cannot come it is not because God will not let them. It is because it is their nature not to want to come.

The second impossibility. Jesus also says that it is *impossible* for someone whom the Father "draws" *not* to come to him. He says in verse 37, "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me" In other words, just as it is impossible for a person to come to Christ apart from the Father drawing him/her, so also is it impossible for a person *not* to come to Christ if the Father does draw him/her. Two crucial elements are involved here. On the one hand, if a man is to be saved he must come to Christ. An active, willing embrace of Jesus Christ in faith is essential. On the other hand, this active, willing embrace of Jesus Christ is guaranteed by virtue of the Father having given certain people to Jesus Christ. John Murray explains it this way:

"Jesus does not say: all that the Father giveth me are brought to me. He uses the term that denotes motion on the part of the person - 'will come to me.' Coming to Christ is the movement of commitment to Christ, coming that engages the whole-souled activity of the person coming. It is not that he may come, not that he has the opportunity to come, not that he will in all probability come, and not simply that he is empowered to come, but that he **will** come. There is absolute certainty; there is a divine necessity; the order of heaven insures the sequence."

John Murray, "Irresistible Grace," in *Soli Deo Gloria: Essays in Reformed Theology*, Festschrift for John H. Gerstner, ed. R. C. Sproul (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), p. 59. The Greek word translated "draw" (John 6:44) is found elsewhere in the NT only in John 12:32; 18:10; 21:6,11; Acts 16:19. Some believe that the use of the term in 12:32 indicates that the "drawing" is not necessarily efficacious in all. But, as D. A. Carson (*Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1981]) has noted, "the 'all' whom Jesus will draw, and the drawing itself, cannot both be taken absolutely, because in the succeeding verses it becomes clear that not *all* are saved (12:35-41). In the context

of the arrival of the Greeks (12:20-22), to whose request for an audience Jesus has not so far responded, the 'all' appears to mean 'all' as opposed to Jews only: Jesus does not talk to the Greeks because that which will draw *all* men is the climactic event of his own death/exaltation" (p. 174).

Therefore, it is impossible that an elect person, a "given-by-the-Father-to-the-Son" person, might fail to come to faith in Christ. Or to put it positively, all the elect shall come to faith in Christ. God's drawing of them is efficacious. The Father will never fail in drawing to salvation those whom he has given to the Son.

Before we move to the third impossibility, observe one more crucial fact. Since this drawing of people by the Father to the Son is always efficacious, it cannot refer to the so-called enabling grace of Arminianism. Do you recall what the Arminian believes? He believes that God restores in all men a power or an ability sufficient to enable them to come to Christ. Clearly this "universal enablement" cannot be the drawing that Jesus describes, Why not? Because millions and millions of men and women do not, in fact, come to Christ! And yet Jesus says that all who are given by the Father are drawn by the Father and shall come to Christ. There is no escaping the clear and unequivocal language of our Lord Jesus Christ: no one can come unless drawn by the Father; but if one is drawn by the Father he shall come.

Some may want to argue that there is significance in what Jesus does not say: He does not say that others have not been given to him by the Father. However, if in fact all are given, then all shall be saved, for Jesus does say that all whom the Father gives him shall come to him. In other words, if election/giving is universal, so is salvation.

The third impossibility. To the previous two impossibilities Jesus adds a third. He has already said it is impossible to come to him *unless* the Father draws. He has also said it is impossible *not* to come if the Father *does* draw. Now he says that when a man does come through the drawing of the Father it is impossible for him to be cast out. Look again at verse 37: "and the one who comes to me I will certainly not cast out." The point is that those whom the Father gives to the Son, who therefore come to the Son, will be received by the Son and shall never perish.

The verb translated "cast out" in verse 37 is used several times in John (2:15; 6:37; 9:34f.; 10:4; 12:31) and always means to cast out someone or something already in. Thus the emphasis here is not so much on receiving the one who comes (although that is true enough in itself) but on *preserving* him. In other words, "6:37 argues not only that the ones given to Jesus will inevitably come to him, but that Jesus will keep them individually . . . once there."(Murray, "Irresistible Grace," 184).

Discussion Questions

- (1) Walk through the differing perspectives on the order of salvation as it is understood by both Calvinists and Arminians. What are the decisive differences? What do they share in common? Why is it important to understand the various cause/effect relationships among the many elements in how God saves a human soul?
- (2) In what sense (or senses) does the Bible use the word "calling"?
- (3) Read aloud John 6:37-40,44,65. What do these texts tell us about the way God's grace converts or saves the human soul? Do these verses undermine the notion of human moral responsibility? If not, why not?
- (4) Is it helpful or harmful to refer to God's saving grace as "irresistible"? Defend your position.
- (5) What precisely happens when God's Spirit regenerates a human soul? What changes come about? Does regeneration or the new birth follow faith as its effect, or does it precede faith as its cause? What texts support your answer?
- (6) Review the "Three Impossibilities" as found in John 6. What conclusions do you draw from this when it comes to the sovereignty of God in salvation?