

Study Guide #6: Calvinism and the Assurance of Salvation

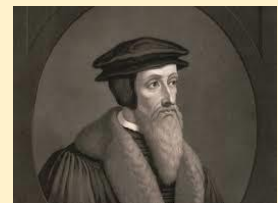
Introduction

In this Study Guide, we explore the deeper issues concerning God's sovereignty, predestination, man's free will, and what these things say about a Christian's assurance of salvation.

Question #1: What is Calvinism?

Answer: John Calvin (d. 1564) was the French Protestant Reformer of the 16th century who revived certain ideas from Augustine (d. 430), the bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Augustine and Calvin emphasized man's total depravity in sin and God's sovereign nature so that they taught man has no free will with which to choose salvation. Therefore, God predestined before anyone was born who would be saved and who would be lost. Then He offers irresistible grace to the elect (the ones chosen for salvation) on the basis of Jesus' limited atonement on the cross, which was allegedly only for the elect. Finally, the elect are given the gift of perseverance so that once God gives them His irresistible grace, they will continue in the faith. This is called 5-Point Calvinism and is illustrated below as the TULIP diagram:

Total Depravity
Unconditional Election
Limited Atonement
Irresistible Grace
Perseverance of the Saints



John Calvin

Question #2: Why is Calvinism taught? What is the reason for it?

Answer: One of the major reasons for its existence is the belief that man can do nothing to aid God in his salvation. That's true. But Calvinism takes the position that if we take hold of salvation by our faith, then somehow our faith must *contribute* to (as in earning) our salvation; and they reject that. The problem is that the Scriptures teach that **“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast”** (Ephesians 2:8-9, NKJV). Note that we receive this gift **“through faith”** and that faith does *not* earn it, according to that text. Likewise with human gifts, by picking up a gift with our hands, by no means have we somehow deserved or earned that gift. That's why it's called a gift. Thus, Calvinism's logic here is flawed.

Question #3: Is Total Depravity a Biblical teaching?

Answer: Yes, we learned in Explorer II, Study Guide #3 that “**The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked**” (Jeremiah 17:9, NKJV). The root Hebrew word for “**desperately**” means “incurable.” And I Corinthians 2:14 states that “**the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned**” (NKJV). Therefore, God must take the initiative to seek us first. With all this, we agree with Calvinism.

But Calvinism assumes that since God must take the initiative to seek us, and it’s obvious from Scripture that the majority will be lost, then God must choose to save some and to damn others. After all, they argue, God is sovereign and can thus do whatever He wants to do. Thus, His election (choice) to salvation is by *irresistible grace*, so that those who are drawn to Him are guaranteed to accept Jesus. In this way, salvation is *all* of God. However, there’s a serious problem with this thinking. Jesus plainly declared that “**I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself**” (John 12:32, NKJV; cf. v. 33 for evidence that He was referring to the cross). If Jesus draws everyone to Himself, and yet the majority will be lost, then obviously His drawing power is *not* irresistible. If it were irresistible, then everyone would be saved. Therefore, with God having to take the initiative toward us, His drawing grace through the Holy Spirit must supernaturally give *sufficient* free will for people to be able to accept *or* reject the free gift of salvation. This *initial* work of grace on the unbeliever is what is called *prevenient grace* because it precedes the full expression of God’s grace of salvation.

Question #4: If God is Sovereign, then why can’t He choose whom to save and whom to damn?

Answer: It’s true that God is Sovereign and can therefore do what He wants to do. But the Scriptures have told us the kind of God He is, which informs us of the kind of things He will and will not do. The 2 chief characteristics for this topic are God’s Love (I John 4:8, 16) and Justice (Deuteronomy 32:4; Job 4:17;



Scales of Justice

Revelation 15:3). God wants us to love Him back, but love absolutely requires free will. If people serve God because He predetermined them to do so, then that isn’t love, but robotic service. Concerning justice, God’s dealings with people in the Old Testament—both Israel and pagans—demonstrate that it can be understood. And by any standard of justice, for God to arbitrarily predetermine who will be saved and who will be lost for His own glory would make God’s behavior the height of egomania! That is neither Love nor Just.

Question #5: Is there a genuine doctrine of predestination in the Bible?

Answer: Yes. The primary chapters that concern this topic are Romans 8-9 and Ephesians 1. We examine these passages in this and the next 2 questions. Regarding Romans 8:28-30, these verses speak about those who have been called, justified, and glorified, and declares that this is all based on God’s “**foreknowledge**” (v. 29)—that is, His ability to know the future as clearly as He knows the past and present. Imagine that you’re a baseball fan, but that an unavoidable event was going to cause you to miss game 7 of the World Series. So you set your DVR to record the game. But after you arrive back home, you discover that a

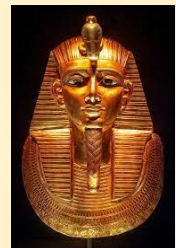
friend had left a voice mail giving you the final score of the game. Since you're such an avid fan, you decide to watch the recorded game anyway. Now does the fact that you know the outcome mean that your foreknowledge caused the outcome to occur? Of course not. There's no cause-and-effect relationship between your foreknowledge and the eventual outcome. Likewise, the fact that God is outside of time and thus knows the end from the beginning doesn't mean He *determined* a later event. In other words, there is no conflict between God's foreknowledge and man's free will.

Question #6: But how do you understand Ephesians 1:4, which states that God “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (NKJV)?

Answer: A careful reading reveals that Paul did *not* say that God chose us *to be in Him* before the foundation of the world. Instead, the text says that God predestined that everyone who is in Christ will be saved, not that the individuals who accept Christ are the ones God has predestined to do so. This is the only interpretation consistent with the reality that God is Love Personified (I John 4:8, 16)—for love absolutely requires free will in order for love to truly be love.

Question #7: What does Roman 9 teach about this topic?

Answer: There are 3 passages in Romans 9 that directly touch on predestination: (a) v. 13; (b) vv. 14-18; and (c) vv. 19-24. Verse 13 quotes God as stating, “**Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated**” (NKJV). See Explorer I, Study Guide #20, Question #4 for a discussion on this and related verses. Verses 14-18 concern the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Moses' day. This is called judicial hardening, which God does only in response to people's response to Him. See Explorer I, Study Guide #20, Question #11 for a discussion of this concept. We discuss verses 19-24 under the next question.



Pharaoh

Question #8: What does Romans 9:19-24 mean?

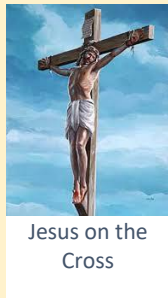
Answer: In this passage, Paul makes the point that God is like the potter, who can make any kind of clay pot that He wants to make—and no one has the right to challenge Him. This is imagery that Paul borrowed from Jeremiah 18:1-11, where the point is that God made different clay pots in response to people's response to Him—so that if a nation to which He promised destruction turns itself around spiritually, He won't deliver them to destruction. Conversely, if a nation to which He promised glory turns away from Him, God won't give them the promised glory (Jeremiah 18:7-10). In other words, all nations—and there's no reason to think the same principle wouldn't apply to individuals—are treated by God as in a covenant context in which both parties promise something to the other in exchange for something in return. This means God treated both ancient Israel and their surrounding pagan nations on the same basis. Concerning predestination, this fact demonstrates that God chooses to exercise His absolute sovereignty by treating people in accordance with their response to Him. This shows how much God respects free will.

Question #9: What is God's desire for people regarding their salvation?

Answer: The apostle Paul categorically states that **“God our Savior...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth”** (I Timothy 2:3-4, NKJV). And the apostle Peter writes that the **“Lord...is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance”** (II Peter 3:9, NKJV). Calvinists often suggest that these texts represent one *aspect* of God's desire—an aspect that He ignores in order to highlight His sovereignty and glory—which again makes Him a most egomaniacal God. The simple truth is that if 5-Point Calvinism is correct, these texts are lying. We prefer to believe that Paul and Peter are here telling the truth about God's desire.

Question #10: What support does Calvinism offer for the concept of Limited Atonement? And how do you respond to it?

Answer: Limited Atonement says that Jesus only died for those He predetermined would be saved. Actually, there are *no* Scriptures that can be used to support this concept. It's believed by Calvinists because it's the only consistent belief that lines up with their version of predestination. The Limited Atonement theory contradicts the plain teaching of Scripture that Jesus died for everyone's sins, as noted below:



- Jesus was **“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”** (John 1:29, NKJV).
- Jesus **“died for all”** (II Corinthians 5:14-15, NKJV).
- Jesus **“taste(d) death for everyone”** (Hebrews 2:9, NKJV).
- Jesus is **“the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world”** (I John 2:2, NKJV).
- Jesus **“gave Himself a ransom for all”** (I Timothy 2:6, NKJV).

Clearly, then, Jesus' atonement on the cross was made for everyone; it is an Unlimited Atonement because it covers everyone who has ever lived or will live. Of course, it's only effective for those individuals who choose to accept it as God's gift to them.

Question #11: How should we respond to the teaching of the gift of perseverance?

Answer: This so-called guarantee that whomever God elects to save will continue to walk with the Lord is yet another violation of a person's free will. We agree that perseverance is a gift from God in that He provides the motive and the power to enable a person to persevere. But that can't preclude the possibility of that person turning his back on the Lord and walking away from Him. Love continues to require free will from the beginning to the end of one's Christian walk.

Question #12: Do you have any other observations to make about Calvinism?

Answer: Calvinists are fond of saying that there's no need to reconcile God's sovereignty with the Bible's statements about God wanting everyone to be saved and that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world because they assert that “friends” don't need to be reconciled. In other words, both sets of statements are true. That's really an intellectually dishonest statement because it's obvious that there's an *apparent*

contradiction between the Calvinist view of predestination and these other Biblical statements. An honest believer knows he must seek to resolve *apparent* conflicts by deeper Bible study. To flippantly dismiss such a need is not becoming of a Bible scholar.

Question #13: Is “once saved, always saved” a Biblical teaching?

Answer: Although the phrase is relatively new in Christian history, the basis for this teaching goes back to Augustine and revived by John Calvin. (See Question #1.) Today the more conservative or fundamentalist Protestant churches tend to teach this doctrine, even though not everyone who does so is a Calvinist. Below is a representative sample of New Testament passages frequently used to support this popular teaching:

“All that the Father gives Me and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out...that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing” (John 6:37-40, NKJV). Note that this passage only means that Jesus won’t lose anyone on account of His decision to reject anyone. It doesn’t say that the believer himself can’t change his mind and exercise free will to depart from Jesus.

“I give them eternal life, and they shall not perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand...and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand” (John 10:27-30, NKJV). The fact that no one can snatch them from God’s hand doesn’t prevent the believer himself from deciding to leave that hand. The language is concerned with a 3rd party being unable to snatch someone out of God’s hand.



In the Hands of Jesus

“For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39, NKJV). Again, no 3rd party can separate us from God.

“to an inheritance incorruptible...reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (I Peter 1:4-5, NKJV). Although the text says we **“are kept by the power of God,”** His power is given to us **“through faith”** in Him. Like the weakest link in the chain, if a believer himself chooses to forsake his faith in Jesus, then even the omnipotent power of God won’t keep him for salvation against his will.

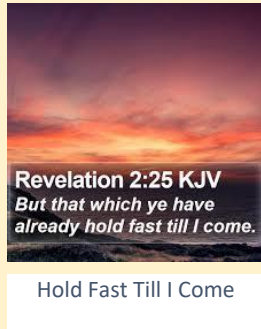
Question #14: Are you saying that “once saved, always saved” is unbiblical?

Answer: Yes. *First*, since salvation is a gift (see Study Guide #5), a person is free to throw it away as he could any other gift he has already received. *Second*, I John 1:7 speaks of the continual need to **“walk in the light...so that...the blood of Jesus...cleanses us from all sin”** (NKJV). The continual cleansing (the verb “cleanses” is in the present continuous tense) is dependent upon the continuous walking in the light. But one can choose to stop walking in the light and start walking in spiritual darkness instead. *Third*, I John 5:12 says that eternal life is found in a relationship with Jesus: **“He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life”** (NKJV). This relationship metaphor means that a person can always choose to end that relationship; God won’t, but *we can*. *Finally*, review Question #8’s answer for the idea that God alters His plans for us depending upon our response to Him. Therefore, for all these reasons, “once saved, always saved” is not a Biblical teaching.

Question #15: Are there any New Testament passages that directly teach that a person can lose his salvation?

Answer: Yes. The following are just a representative sample of such passages:

“But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:22; cf. Matthew 24:13; Mark 13:13). Since Jesus admonished His followers to *endure* to the end, then it must be possible *not* to endure to the end.



The command is given to **“hold fast what you have till I come. And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations”** (Revelation 2:25-26, NKJV; cf. 3:11). Since Jesus admonished Christians to **“hold fast,”** then it must be possible to *not* “hold fast.” Moreover, the repeated commands to **“overcome”** in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 would be meaningless if it were not possible to stop overcoming.

“Now the Spirit expressly says that in the latter times some will depart from the faith” (I Timothy 4:1, NKJV). Note that it’s the faith, not only the Church, that some will depart from. According to Hebrews 11:6, **“without faith it is impossible to please Him [God]”** (NKJV). Thus, a departure from the faith is a departure from God and salvation.

[NOTE: See also Hebrews 4:4-6; 10:26-27; and I Peter 2:20-21.]

Question #16: Is it possible to have any assurance of one’s salvation?

Answer: Yes. Since salvation is based on a relationship with Jesus (as per I John 5:11-12), as long as a person knows he’s in a positive relationship with Him, he is in a saved condition. Remember, of course, that a relationship is not over simply because you have reached a rough spot. At the same time, we should never think that simply because we made a decision a long time ago that we can’t undo it. Assurance, Yes; “once saved, always saved,” No.