

SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

PART 49

KEYT TERMS: ELECTION, PART 10

There are other Scriptures that reveal Christ died for the sins of the world and that the Father wants all people to volitionally decide to believe. Most will not come to faith but that does not negate the provision that was made on the cross by Christ Jesus. All means all, the world means the world, and whoever means whoever and no amount of theological sleight of hand can change that.

“Our understanding of so-called election must be founded upon the appointment of Israel and of Christ. In neither case was there an unconditional election to salvation.... Was Israel unconditionally elected to salvation? Was Christ unconditionally elected to salvation? Obviously not! The Church succeeded Israel as the choice people of God in this age of grace and only exists because of its connection by faith with its Head, Jesus Christ, the Choice One of the Father. The predominant meaning of ‘choice’ and ‘appointing or commissioning of the choice’ in secular Greek and the Septuagint carries over into the New Testament in a major way, and significantly opens up the meaning of key passages...

In considering all the theologically relevant passages, it is clear that there is no basis for a doctrine of individual unconditional election. The corporate nature of ‘election’ is so clear in enough contexts to lead to the probability that all should be taken corporately. *Moreover, this word study raises the question whether there really is any biblical doctrine of ‘election’ at all.* The only kind of election in the classical Greek was political. It is probable that the only valid use of the English word election is in the political realm and the essentially transliterated term in the English New Testament has nothing to do with God choosing anybody to salvation. Even if our mindset is in such a rut that we cannot abandon this idea, there are significant number of contexts in which conditional ‘choice’ is clear. Conversely there is no clear, unambiguous evidence of unconditional election in any of the contexts. Therefore, we must not read unconditional election into those contexts which could be taken either way. The presumption in those cases is in favor of a consistent picture of so-called election being conditioned upon the sinner’s response to the gospel message in repentant faith.

Is ‘election’ corporate or is it conditional? It is probably both, and in any case, unconditional election is a serious error. At the very least, we have raised enough doubts about Augustine’s novel doctrine to cause Calvinists to stop building their whole theology of salvation upon it” [C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism & Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation*, pp. 328-329].

Our goal concerning issues such as the doctrines of predestination and election is to know the Bible and theology well enough to spot the errors in sermons, commentaries, books, and the like in order to be able to discern truth from error and it matters not who presents the errors and where they do it. We are to give no one credit simply for being famous. We have to be able to recognize the errors and heresies, avoid them, and be able to biblically refute them and, at the same time, be able to teach the truth of the Word. If the great apostle Paul can be checked against the Word of God by the Bereans, then everyone else can certainly be checked against the Word of God as well. No one is above being measured against the only standard that is to be used and that is the Word of God.

Acts 17:11 ¹¹Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.

I know I have angered some people because throughout this discussion, I have been very critical in my evaluation of Calvinism in the hermeneutics they use and in their theology in general. Having said that, a number of people have thanked me for doing this because they recognize the unbiblical nature of the Calvinistic system. I believe I have proven this time and time again by using their very own words to convict them of the theological aberrations I have alleged. One of the reasons I have concentrated on their theology is because they have been the most prolific in advancing their view through books, journals, and classrooms and all the early dispensationalists were Calvinists. Amillennialists do not get a pass on this either; they are also aberrant in similar, yet at times different ways. Many dispensationalists, particularly some of us older dispensational believers, still hold to the Chafer, Walvoord, Ryrie, form of dispensational Calvinism and it took a lot of time and Bible study to convince me they had not departed from Calvinism far enough. I was certainly introduced to dispensational theology through these men and I now stand on their shoulders in promulgating dispensational theology. However, I believe I have proven all five points of Calvinism to be unbiblical as they define them within their system of theology and dispensational theology has, in its traditional form (i.e. dispensational theology other than progressive dispensationalism which is a move towards Reformed Calvinism instead of away from it and hyper-dispensationalism which has always been considered aberrant) moved away from all of these theological impositions onto the Scriptures. That's a step forward in developing a better understanding of the Bible, of God's plan for history, and of Soteriology. It is no accident that the formation of Bible churches and the development Free Grace Soteriology began at Dallas Theological Seminary through some of its graduates. But in the same way that Luther and Calvin could not fully divorce themselves from Augustinian theology and the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, early dispensationalists could not fully divorce themselves from the theology of

Calvinism in which they were raised. Even then, men like Chafer, Walvoord, and Ryrie departed from not only replacement theology but also limited atonement, which is where their big break from Calvinism began, and they also began to define some of the other points in the Calvinist system in a different way that was more aligned with the Scriptures. Modern, Free Grace dispensationalists have, for the most part, continued refining these definitions and have moved away from all five points of Calvinism in the direction of forming a much more biblical system of dispensational theology and Soteriology and that has been a very good development. A vocal critic of dispensational theology, John Gerstner, recognized the early dispensational link to Calvinism and lamented its passing. "The fact that the antinomian tendencies of Dispensationalism were previously held somewhat in check is due to the fact that, early in its history, Dispensationalism was grafted on to theologies and church traditions, such as Calvinism, where the law of God and obedience to it were held in high esteem" [John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the World of Truth: A critique of Dispensationalism*, p. 293]. In my view, the departure from Calvinism has enhanced the clarity of the gospel message and that is a very good thing.

Please do not misunderstand me. I have the utmost respect for the early dispensational theologians. I have a lot of Darby's work in my library. I possess and have read all of Ryrie's books; I've taken seminary classes from him and I have learned a great deal from his work. I have read much of Walvoord's work and it is excellent. Chafer's *Systematic Theology* is still the best systematic theology ever written. But that doesn't mean they didn't have a ways to go in terms of developing dispensational theology. Tradition and history are not sufficient reasons to cling to theology that can be proven unbiblical. Dispensational theology is not personality driven and it is not theologically driven; it is biblically driven. A major factor in developing dispensational theology and Soteriology is the move away from the five points of Calvinism and redefining these terms in a way that is more in line with biblical revelation. That's what I have been trying to do in this section of my lectures concerning predestination and election.

What I am not saying is that Calvinists, and Arminians for that matter, are not Christians. However, I have also noted that these systems readily lend themselves to a Lordship salvation mindset which is a faith plus works false gospel. Anytime conditions are imposed on a person in order to "prove" they are really saved by virtue of something they do or do not do or to prevent losing salvation as the result of personal sins or apostasy, then conditions have been added to justification salvation and it is no longer grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Human effort has then been added to justification. To the extent that anyone believes a faith plus works gospel, they need to be evangelized; they are lost.

My hope in teaching these sections on predestination and election has been to get people to think about what God through the Bible is revealing to us. To the extent I have proven my case, I hope some people have been encouraged to think about these issues and perhaps change their thinking and develop their theology in a more biblical direction. If you are already on board with what I've been teaching, then I hope I have encouraged you to stay the course because we are very much in the minority in this area.

REWARDS & INHERITANCE

It may surprise you to know that many pastors and theologians do not believe in the doctrine of rewards as taught by Free Grace theologians and pastors and as we believe the Bible teaches the doctrine. These people insist that there will be no difference in rewards between believers that have eternal consequences; everyone receives the same commendation from the Lord. Additionally, many theologians believe there is one general judgment for all people, believers and unbelievers, at the same time. The belief in one general judgment for all is so widespread that outside of dispensational theologians, the subject is minimalized and ignored. Some very large systematic theology texts hardly refer to an end times judgment and when they do, they simply relate it to a one judgment for all people at one time.

Let's look at a representative presentation of the majority of thinking on rewards as presented by a Denver Seminary professor named Craig Blomberg.

“But ironically it is precisely in those circles—[referring to Free Grace theology] largely but by no means exclusively dispensationalist in heritage—that rightly seek to preserve the strong Reformation tradition of God's freely granted justification apart from any human merit that often a contrary doctrine is also vigorously promoted: the doctrine of degrees of reward in heaven. Believers may enter into God's family entirely apart from their own good works, but the degree to which they will enjoy heaven is said exclusively to depend on how they live out their Christian life—to what extent they obey God's commandments and mature in the faith. In short, though few would put it so baldly one is left with justification by faith and sanctification by works. In the twenty years of my adult Christian life I have grown progressively more uncomfortable with any formulation that differentiates among believers as regards our eternal rewards.... I do not believe there is a single NT text that, when correctly interpreted, supports the notion that believers will be distinguished one from another for all eternity on the basis of their works as Christians. What is more, I am convinced that when this unfounded doctrine of degrees of reward in heaven is acted upon consistently—though, fortunately, it often is not—it can have highly damaging consequences for the motivation and psychology of living the Christian life.... A too simplistic understanding of “eternal security” has

probably led many Christians to doubt that Paul could have seriously considered not “making it to heaven.” But true Reformed doctrine recognizes that saints are those who persevere. No Biblical text offers assurance of salvation for people who flagrantly repudiate Christ without subsequent repentance.... The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ ought to liberate believers from all such performance-centered conceptions of the Christian life. An important step in that direction would be to jettison this misguided and discouraging doctrine of eternal rewards that distinguish one believer from another. The important counterquestion may then be posed: What motivation remains for obeying any of God's commandments? Why not become a Christian and then expend as little effort as possible serving Christ? The very fact that the counterquestion follows naturally encourages us that we are on the right track: It is the very question Paul himself anticipated in Rom 6:1 after he articulated his theology of justification by faith. The correct answer would seem to have at least two prongs to it. First, to continue following closely Paul's own train of thought, the person who comes to such a conclusion demonstrates that he or she has not truly appreciated or appropriated salvation at all. In other words, one of the main reasons for trying to live as good a Christian life as possible is to make sure that we do in fact persevere, so that we do not lose out on eternal life altogether. Second, and even more fundamentally, proper Christian motivation for pleasing God should stem from a profound sense of gratitude for what Christ has already done for us... Here is the crucial contribution of those who today advocate lordship salvation. Ironically, those who seek most strenuously to preserve justification by grace may lead professing believers to think they are saved when in fact they are not. Grace will have been preserved—but not justification. God assures salvation only to those who presently believe in Jesus as Son of God (1 John 5:13). Claims of commitment, long since abandoned, may not be salvaged by any appeal to a category of “carnal Christian,” though Paul does use that term for those who continue to believe but remain unduly immature in their faith (1 Cor 3:3). The major spokespersons for historic Calvinism and Arminianism agree that people commit apostasy and are lost for all eternity. They merely disagree as to what that proves about their prior state (cf. e.g. 1 John 2:19 with Heb 6:4–6). The greatest danger of the doctrine of degrees of reward in heaven is that it has misled many people into thinking that the very nominal professions that they or their friends have at one time made will be sufficient to save them, even if they fail to receive as high a status in heaven as they might have. This is in no way to argue for works-righteousness. It is merely to remind us of the consistent Biblical theme that true, saving faith does over time lead to visible transformations in lifestyle and to growth in holiness (Matt 7:15–27; Gal 5:6, 19–24; Jas 2:14–26; 1 John 3:4–10). Without such evidence that God's Spirit has truly taken up residence and begun to work within a person, Biblical Christianity is absent. But even with the help of God's Spirit, no believers ever so approach the standards of God's holiness that it would make sense to eternally reward them differently from their Christian peers. May all evangelicals recover this precious legacy

of the Protestant Reformation and do away with the depressing and damaging notion of eternal degrees of reward in heaven once and for all." [Craig L. Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 35, no. 2 (June 1992): 159-172].

The title of this article, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven?" is presented as a question because Blomberg does not agree with the concept of varying levels and degrees of rewards among believers either in the Kingdom or in eternity—which he combines anyway. That seems to be the thinking in Reformed/Calvinist theology today, but it didn't start out that way. Calvin thought the Bible clearly taught varying levels and degrees of rewards. "We should regard as above all controversy the teaching of Scripture that, just as God, variously distributing his gifts to the saints in this world, beams upon them unequally, so there will not be an equal measure of glory in heaven, where God shall crown his own gifts...For anyone who closely studies the Scriptures, they promise believers not only eternal life but a special reward for each....In short as Christ begins the glory of his body in this world with manifold diversity of gifts, and increases it by degrees, so also he will perfect it in heaven" [John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, pp. 2:1005-1006].

Blomberg makes numerous errors in his assessment of rewards. He makes the claim that the doctrine of rewards contradicts the doctrine of justification salvation that is salvation by grace alone through faith alone. He makes this error because his Reformed/Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints does not and cannot recognize any distinction between justification and sanctification. That doctrine claims that a "true" Christian must persevere in obedience and good works or they have proven their faith is a false faith and they remain unsaved. We know that to be a false doctrine; there is a clear distinction between justification and sanctification. An unbeliever, by faith, believes and receives eternal life which can never be lost and is not dependent on anything the newly born again person does in the future beyond that point in time. Rewards follow based on a Christian life well lived as shown by bearing spiritual fruit and doing good works. We are justified by faith and experientially sanctified by works. We also acknowledge, however, that we have a perfect positional sanctification in Christ but due to the remaining presence of the sin nature in our life, our experiential sanctification may be lacking, deficient, and marred. The Lord will examine our walk and to the extent we have served and glorified Him, we will be rewarded; to the extent we fail to serve and glorify Him, we will "suffer loss" or lose rewards. Perhaps we can think of losing rewards as a failure to gain awards but either way they are lost for eternity.

Blomberg also makes the claim that no Scripture, properly interpreted, says that believers will be distinguished one from the other for eternity based on their work for the

Lord in this life. The key to understanding this claim is to understand what Blomberg means by “correctly interpreted.” For him, properly interpreting a Scripture refers to filtering its meaning through the theological grid of Reformed theology with the emphasis on the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. But are there Scriptures that do, in fact, inform us that believers will be rewarded to varying degrees based on the Lord’s examination of their work and those rewards will have lasting consequences? There are.

1 Corinthians 3:11–15 ¹¹For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. ¹⁴If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss [ζημιώω]; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

This Scripture is about leaders in the church, but it has an application for all believers. The foundation itself is Christ Jesus and we all must carefully build on that foundation using the spiritual gifts with which we have been provided. This Scripture absolutely indicates there will be differences between believers as their work is judged by the Lord. Any work that survives the Lord’s examination and is not burned up or destroyed will receive a reward of some sort. Other Scriptures seem to indicate these rewards will be in the form of crowns and of varying levels of responsible service for the Lord. The person who fails to produce any worthwhile works will “suffer loss” but justification salvation is secure. Justification simply isn’t the issue; Blomberg makes it the issue. Clearly, there are distinctions made between believers by the Lord and those distinctions are based on the work performed whether it consists of wood, hay, and straw or gold, silver, and precious stones. You can’t just wave a theological magic wand and deny biblical truth because it offends your personal sensibilities that some believers will be rewarded to a greater degree than others will be rewarded.

“Suffer loss,” ζημιώω, means to suffer loss or damage, or to forfeit something. The meaning of this word serves as a warning concerning the use of lexicons. Strong’s, BDAG, and Louw Nida all use this verse to say that the word means to be punished. That is importing one’s theology into the definition of the word and it does not carry that meaning in this verse. Louw Nida does explain “it is also possible to understand [it] in 1 Cor. 3:15 as meaning simply ‘to suffer loss.’” Vine’s Expository Dictionary correctly defines it to mean “to suffer loss, forfeit, [or] lose.”

“He shall suffer loss...to suffer loss. In Matt. 16:26, Mark 8:36, Luke 9:25, the loss is stated to be the man’s soul or eternal life. But here there is no such total loss as that. The man’s

work is burned up (sermons, lectures, books, teaching, all dry as dust). *But he himself shall be saved*. Eternal salvation, but not by purgatory. His work is burned up completely and hopelessly, but he himself escapes destruction because he is really a saved man, a real believer in Christ. *Yet so as through fire*. Clearly Paul means with his work burned down. It is the tragedy of a fruitless life, of a minister who built so poorly on the true foundation that his work went up in smoke. His sermons were empty froth or windy words without edifying or building power. They left no mark in the lives of the hearers. It is the picture of a wasted life. The one who enters heaven by grace, as we all do who are saved, yet who brings no sheaves with him. There is no garnered grain as the result of his labours in the harvest field. There are no souls in heaven as the result of his toil for Christ, no enrichment of character, no growth in grace" [Archibald T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, p. 4:98].

Those who suffer loss are not unbelievers. Some believers will be rewarded for bearing more "gold, silver, and precious stones" than others while some believers will suffer loss for their failure to bear anything other than what the Lord deems to be worthless wood, hay, and straw. This Scripture clearly presents the truth that some believers will be more or less rewarded by the Lord than others. "The question here is therefore *not* punishment, but rather loss of reward. There is no inherent idea of physical or mental suffering. The basic idea is loss or forfeiture of reward which one could have received. For each Christian there is potential reward. However, if the believer is not faithful, he will lose that reward, not in the sense that he once had it, but he will lose it in the sense that he could have had it" [Samuel L. Hoyt, "The Judgment Seat of Christ in Theological Perspective, part 2: The Negative Aspects of the Christian's Judgment" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137, no. (April-June 1980): 125-130].