

**How God's Sovereignty Makes Us Happy
Session II (Rejoicing in Real Life)**

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"The soul hungers for truth as the body hungers for food." -Andrew Kern¹

Does your soul hunger for truth? Have you committed to love and obey the truth above all things? I hope so. To be happy you need to be spiritually free, and to be spiritually free you must love the truth.

Once you are committed to truth, you are able to consider what is often a stumbling block, but which has become for me the most precious doctrine of all to be able to face this world's and my own sorrows with joy: the absolute sovereignty of God, not only over our salvation but in every detail that comes to pass in His universe.

In this session I am going to make the case for this and why it is a great thing for us. I am going to tackle the meaning of God's electing love, the order of salvation, free will, and why knowing God is fully sovereign over all things that come to pass is the ground of our joy in all that *does* come to pass. So buckle your seatbelts and put on your thinking caps: we are going to cover a lot of ground.

The first thing we need to know, and the first thing I learned in Al Anon before I was even a Christian is that:

You Aren't in Charge of Your Life, and that's a Good Thing

Scripture is clear that God is Sovereign. God is in charge of all things. That means that we are *not* in charge, and that is an important reason why we can be ever so happy.

This is counter-intuitive. We don't like not being in control. It's un-American not to be fiercely independent, forging our own path, right? The famous poem "Invictus"² declares: "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul." These lines have been repeated so much they have become clichés, and they certainly capture the spirit of our age. Not only do we like imagining that we are in charge of our fates, we often feel that if we are in control, we can protect ourselves and those we love.

¹ <https://formajournal.com/article/let-us-attend>

² <https://poets.org/poem/invictus>

But is this true? Not really. We can't control events or other people, and even self-control is a virtue we must work at. We can take protective measures, but we are not powerful enough to protect ourselves and those we love against bad decisions or bad things occurring.

Thankfully, the message of the Bible is that we are meant to live depending on God, not ourselves. Acting independently from God's command is what launched the universe into disaster. Since God is all-powerful, wise, loving and good, not to mention supremely happy, his sovereign control of our lives is cause for great joy. The more we believe that God controls everything that concerns us, the more peace we will enjoy. Greg Forster, author of *The Joy of Calvinism*, even defines joy in terms of God's sovereignty. He says that joy is a "settled confidence that God is in control."³ I don't actually agree that this settled certainty IS joy; but I do believe he is correct in this sense: the more confident we are in God's control, the happier we will be.

In fact, when it comes to being happy, perhaps the most important truth to lay hold of is that God really is sovereign.

Two Views of Sovereignty: Humility Required

All Christians affirm that God is sovereign, but how his sovereignty plays out has been debated for centuries. Does God ordain all that comes to pass, or does he limit himself so as not to violate human freedom? Does God step back and let people exercise their free will without interference from him so that they may freely choose to love him? Or is God actively sovereign over everything that happens, including our salvation?

Let me say up front that brilliant Christian theologians disagree about these questions, so I want to approach this topic with humility. I am convinced of what I believe, and it is the teaching of our church, but I want to make clear that this is not a salvation issue.

When wrestling with questions of God's sovereignty and human freedom, people of true faith may come to different conclusions. In C.S. Lewis's book *The Great Divorce*, an allegory about heaven and hell, one of the people in heaven says, "That's what we find out when we reach this country. We've all been wrong!"⁴

I think that is true. When the day of redemption comes, we will find out that we have all been wrong in one way or another, so I approach this topic with passion, but humility. I don't know where I am wrong, but I am pretty sure I am wrong in some way about many things. Only God sees the full picture.

Christians have always agreed that the Bible teaches both that God is fully sovereign *and* that we are responsible for our free choices. How these two doctrines work together is the source of

³ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-calvinists-miss-the-key-to-happiness>

⁴ <https://www.thespiritlife.net/81-warfare/warfare-publications/3204-the-great-divorce-by-cs-lewis-chapters-10-14>

much discussion and debate, but it ought not cause us to divide. And by the way, I quote C.S. Lewis a lot, and he was most definitely not in the same theological camp as I on the doctrine of God's sovereignty.

So if you disagree with what I say, that's ok. But I do hope you will carefully consider these things, because I believe that the Reformed understanding of God's sovereignty not only reflects most accurately what scripture says, but it gives us rest and peace and joy in a way a lower view of God's sovereignty cannot.

When *I* use the term "sovereignty," *I mean* that God ordains all things that come to pass.⁵ Other views don't agree with that, but still affirm God's sovereignty. So please know that I when I use this term, I am NOT implying that other theological traditions deny God's sovereignty. That would not be true or fair.

BUT FIRST, A STORY

My view of God's sovereignty dramatically changed because of the traumatic experience of my mom dying apart from Christ. Let me tell you what happened. After I was converted, I had tried to speak with her about Christ a few times over the years, but she always got sort of irritated and shut me down. My parents stopped attending church when the kids grew up, and aside from my step-dad saying grace before dinner, I didn't see any evidence of faith.

My mom had had breast cancer in her forties and did well for a long time, but twenty years later it came back. It was just tiny little calcium spots on the mammogram, but it had already spread to her lymph nodes, and it was aggressive, as recurrences often are. She had a double mastectomy and reconstruction, plus chemo. It was rough, but we all hoped the crisis was over.

Several months later, she developed back pain, and it took a while to diagnose. She called me on a Thursday and said, "The cancer is back; it is all throughout my body. I'm going into the hospital tomorrow for chemo." Ever determined, she planned to attend a fancy-dress ball the following weekend. "Don't come," she said. "I will call you if you need to."

I didn't have to wait long. Three days later she called and said, "Come." I flew down to Palo Alto the next day, a Monday.

I had prayed for my mom's salvation for over ten years. I had been taught that God wants to save everyone, that he will leave no stone unturned to reach the lost, and that if I prayed, God would surely answer that prayer. What happened instead shocked me to the core.

When I arrived at Stanford Hospital and sat down with her, I asked her if she believed in Jesus. Right away she got really agitated. She said, "Yes, but not in the way you do." It was clear she did not want to discuss it any further. She was so sick. I didn't have the heart or courage to press the issue. Strike one.

⁵ <http://www.reformation21.org/confession/2013/01/chapter-3.php>

I found a chaplain, a wonderful Pentecostal African American woman who was full of love and faith. She prayed with me and then asked, "Would you like me to talk to your mom?" Would I ever. But when we got to my mom's room, my step-dad blocked the door and would not allow her in. He didn't want anyone upsetting my mom. Strike two.

My mom liked the chaplain of the Stanford Chapel and asked for him. He came but didn't even sit down. He just stood there, uneasily shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He asked, "Are you at peace with where you are going?" My mom answered yes, and that was that. He left, no doubt relieved. Strike three.

I had littles at home and flew home after three days, telling myself she might still get better. She died the next day.

All of this was devastating and completely upended my theology. There was literally no time. Who dies of cancer in a week? Why did God allow that? Every time I tried to bring the gospel to her, far from opening doors, God seemed to be slamming them shut. I was heavily burdened with guilt. I should have been bolder, more forceful, I didn't use the right words. My mom had died apart from Christ and it was my fault.

Friends tried to encourage me that she may have called on the Lord in the last moment. But there was no evidence of that, and I wasn't going to lie to myself. Either something was very wrong with my theology, or it was all a lie and I was going to have to abandon the faith altogether.

A dear friend gave me a book by Jerry Bridges: *Trusting God*. She got it from her dear friend who had died from a brain tumor. By the end of that scripture-soaked book I was convinced that God is sovereign over everything, including salvation. It saved my faith.

At this time I also discovered R C Sproul on the radio and began learning about the Reformed Faith, which affirms this same sovereignty of God in all things. So many of my questions were answered, and I found this way of understanding scripture to make so much more sense out of things. I was still deeply sad about my mom, but able to trust her destiny to God, who does all things well.

I decided that I needed to find a Reformed church but had no idea where to look. I needed a new church anyway, because I had been attending the same one for five years and still had not made a single real friend. I just wasn't able to plug in.

I had been told about Bear Creek church by a couple that attended, although they didn't mention it was Reformed. Later I met Donna and Dick Barcus (now Donna Greb) in line for some pro-life meeting, and Donna invited me to come, again without mentioning its theology. In the providence of God, I decided to try it. I showed up to BCC with my two and four year olds in January of 2001. I was recovering from prophylactic mastectomy surgery that December

(another long story), still traumatized by my mom's death, and dealing with the loss of body parts.

But this church was amazing. People talked to me! That had never happened to me before. I met Pastor Dale that very day – I had never been able to meet the pastors in the previous two large churches I attended for twelve years. On top of all that, he was preaching from Romans, and I realized, oh my goodness, this guy is Reformed.

When we talked I asked him if he was Reformed, he hemmed and hawed and wouldn't give me a straight answer. I didn't know that it was quite controversial in our area at the time. I thought, I don't know why you are hesitating, but you are Reformed. I think I'm home.

That was nineteen years ago. They welcomed us, and for the first time in my believing life, I felt I really belonged to a church family.

As for my natural family, I am still the only believer, except my kids, for whom I thank God every day. There is literally no reason why I should believe, other than he just came and got me, plucking me out of a family and culture enmeshed in unbelief.

Experience should not determine our beliefs; scripture should. But my life experience confirms the doctrine found in scripture that God is sovereign over salvation.

A Short (and oversimplified) History of Reformed (Calvinist) vs Arminian Theology⁶

How *are* we reconciled to God? The Bible teaches both that we choose God and that he chooses us. The main issue I think is this: who chooses first? The way we answer this question will put us in one of two main theological camps.

Briefly, in Protestant circles the two main schools of thought are Reformed theology (or Calvinism) and Arminianism. Reformed theology is common in Presbyterian, Reformed, and a few Baptist churches. (I prefer to use the word Reformed rather than Calvinism, because it first emerged from the Reformation launched by Luther and is much bigger than Calvin alone.) I am not going to discuss non-Protestant theology because I am not enough of an insider or expert, other than to say that neither of them would support the Reformed view of salvation. But it would not be appropriate to call them Arminian since both churches existed long before Arminius.

Arminianism arose as a critique of Reformed theology/Calvinism and is named after 17th century Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius. It is common in Methodist, Pentecostal, and most Baptist churches. This is an oversimplification but in general what happened. BCC is, of course, Reformed in theology.

⁶ <https://www.challies.com/articles/an-introduction-to-calvinism-arminianism/>

Both views affirm God's sovereignty, but they understand and explain it differently. I am going to argue that the Reformed understanding not only is more faithful to scripture, but leads to greater happiness than the Arminian one, because it involves a higher view of God and lower view of human beings. This results in greater joy in God's mercy, increased gratitude for his grace, and strong assurance of our salvation which frees us from fear and gives us peace.

God's Electing Love: Who chooses first?

Each view affirms that both God's choice and human decision are involved in salvation. The disagreement is over who chooses *first*.

The Bible uses the term "elect" to describe those who are destined to be children of God. Elect simply means those chosen by God. Each theological view explains election differently.

Arminian theology says that God loves the whole world and *offers* salvation equally to all. It is up to human beings to respond to the gospel by freely deciding to trust in Christ. God offers, man decides. According to Arminianism, when the Bible speaks of God's election, it means that God looks into the future, sees who will choose *him*, and elects those people to salvation. In Arminian theology, man chooses first.

Arminians take this view because, if as the Bible says, God is love and shows no partiality, then they reason that he must love everybody equally, and therefore he must offer salvation equally to all. Sometimes as a way of illustrating God's love they will say, "If you were the only person in the whole world who would believe in Jesus, he would still have died just for you." As true as that seems, it's not too much of a leap to go from one to none. If only one person believed, that would be shocking enough. But what if nobody responded to Christ's offer at all? In Arminian theology, it is entirely possible that no one would ever believe the gospel, and Jesus would have gone to the Cross for nothing. Phew! Good thing that didn't happen! But perhaps God had a better plan than risking complete failure.

By contrast, Reformed theology says that it is God who chooses first by electing, or choosing, some to salvation, and sovereignly regenerating them by the Holy Spirit. Since all people are born spiritually dead and hostile to God, apart from his intervention, no one would come to Christ.

In this view, we do have free will and make real decisions. The trouble is, we can only choose in accordance with our own nature. Since our unredeemed nature is enslaved to sin and hostile to God, we will continue to reject him. We cannot choose God and would never want to. Sin is not so much what we do but who we are. Left to ourselves, we would never come. So God, for his own reasons that have nothing to do with anything in us, elects some people to salvation, giving them spiritual life. They are born again, given a new nature that is alive to God. Before being regenerated, the gospel was foolishness to them, but now they can hear and understand it so that they are able to trust Christ.

We call this difference from Arminianism the *ordo salutis*: the order of salvation. Arminians believe that a person hears the gospel, believes, and then is born again. Reformed theology teaches that first we must be born again, and only then can we believe the gospel.

This brings us to another doctrine of Reformed theology: “total depravity.” This does NOT mean that we are as bad as we could possibly be. It means that every aspect of our being is tainted by sin. Our desires are disordered. We want what we shouldn’t and don’t want what we should. We love lesser things more and greater things less. We are drawn to sin and bored by purity. Sin affects our minds as well as our desires. Even our perceptions are distorted. We literally can’t think straight. The farther people go from God, the more disordered their thinking and desires become.

When God makes us alive by the Holy Spirit, we have a sense of having been awakened. We see and understand things we never could before. Once we were blind, but now we see. And when we are made able to see spiritual truth, we find that we want it. It is beautiful and good and true, and our new nature is drawn to it.

This leads us to another doctrine of Reformed theology: “irresistible grace.” Anyone who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit *will* come to the Lord. Resisting God once we have been born again is unthinkable. Have you been to Yosemite? We went there just a couple of weeks ago. Resisting God once we have been made able to perceive his truth, goodness and beauty, would be like seeing the majesty of Yosemite Valley for the first time and wishing we were shopping at the mall instead. If someone is bored by Yosemite, there is something deeply wrong with them, just as there is something deeply wrong with unredeemed humanity in its natural rejection of God.

Being awed by beauty and drawn to it is part of being human. All human beings love the beauty of the natural world. Being born again means you now you can perceive and love the beauty of spiritual things. God *is* beauty, and he is the source of life and truth and goodness. Therefore the regenerate person will always want God. The regenerated person freely chooses to believe the gospel, but now does it according to the new nature given by God. 2 Corinthians 5:17 declares: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” God has not violated our free will at any point. It’s just that now we *want* to know God. We have found our true happiness.

More Scriptural Evidence

Ephesians tells us this:

Long ago, even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave him great pleasure (Eph. 1:4-5, NLT).

Think of that! Before God made the world, he had an *unchanging plan* that included you and me. And *it gave God pleasure* to plan and to do this! Is that not a reason for joy right there? If God chose us in Christ before he even made the world, the plain sense of the passage means *he* chose first. I often return to this passage to remind me that it made God happy to choose me for his kingdom, to adopt me into his family, and that I am part of his unchanging plan. That's security.

Or consider what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:14: "The natural man 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 natural man is the person who has not been born again. If you have ever tried to explain the gospel to someone who doesn't grasp anything about what you are saying or looks at you like you are crazy, this verse explains why. It will not make any sense to the unregenerate person. I still remember *being* that person. I simply could not understand spiritual things.

Why? Because I was spiritually dead and dead people can't see or do anything. They're dead. Ephesians elaborates on this:

(You) were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 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. (Eph 2:1-9)

We are all born sinful, alienated from God and under his wrath. God's wrath is not petulant or cranky. It is his settled opposition to evil in all of its forms. God's wrath is what we need to be saved from. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God," says the writer to the Hebrews (10:31), "but God, being rich in mercy" made us alive, and by grace he gave us the gift of faith. It is his doing.

Just as we had nothing to do with our physical birth, we have nothing to do with our spiritual rebirth. It is something that happens to us.

Faith is a gift God gives to us. It is not a gift that we give to God.

Jesus explains this in the book of John. He tells Nicodemus: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he **cannot see** the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:3).

You can't respond to the gospel unless you have been born again. You can't understand it. You can't even see it.

In John 6:44 Jesus tells his disciples: "No one **can** come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."

And lest you object that the Father draws everyone, Jesus says this in John Ch. 15:16:

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit...."

Not only is it not possible to come unless the Father draws a person, we see again that God chooses first.

The Arminian Explanation

The Arminian view explains these and other scriptures by saying that God looks into the future, sees who will respond to the gospel, and elects them, drawing them to salvation. Arminians prize human free will. They believe human free will is necessary, because love must be freely chosen or it isn't love. When Jesus says no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, they interpret "draw" to mean wooing and inviting. Sometimes Arminians will say things like "God is a gentleman; he woos and invites but will never force himself on us." In this view, salvation is based on man's choice, not God's.

I happened to learn in Sunday school last week that this Greek word translated "draw" in John 6:44 is translated "drag" in James chapter 2, when James is criticizing church favoritism toward the rich. James thunders, "But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are **dragging** you into court?" (James 2:6) It's also translated "drag" in Acts 16:19 when Paul and Silas were "**dragged** into the marketplace to face the authorities." So this "drawing" seems to be a rather forceful one! The Greek word means "compel." Considering the full context of scripture, is there any reason to think otherwise?

Was God *wooing* Paul when he knocked him to the ground and blinded him on the road to Damascus? Jesus did not *invite* Paul to obey him; he commanded him to do so. This same Paul later told the Athenians that "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world..." (Acts 17:30). The God that Paul experienced and described is not a wooing God, but a commanding God.

Again, Paul explains God's election in Romans:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom

he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.
(Romans 8:29-30)

In the Arminian view, God does not predestine everyone he foreknows but only those who believe. But in this text *all* God foreknew he *also* predestined. Since everyone is not saved, God's foreknowledge here cannot be for all of humanity, but only for those God saves. Foreknowledge therefore must refer to a particular people God chooses out of all of humanity to be his own special people.

When the gospel was first explained to me as a child, it was the Arminian understanding. I was told that if I asked Jesus to come into my heart, I would be born again. I did this most sincerely, but I was not born again. This was perplexing. I was spiritually dead, though in some sense at least I felt God's call and wanted to respond. Yet when I read the Bible I could not understand it at all. It was contradictory and confusing. My prayers bounced off the ceiling. It was only when I was in my twenties that the Lord gave me that new birth, opened my eyes and gave me sight. I still remember the difference, and it is stark.

Order of Salvation Not Always Apparent

The order of salvation is not always apparent because most of the time God regenerates people in close association with the hearing of the gospel. One could easily conclude that responding in faith is what brings the gift of the Holy Spirit. But it doesn't always happen in near simultaneous fashion. It didn't happen that way for me. It didn't happen that way for C.S. Lewis, who, like me, was first converted to theism and only later to Christianity.

For some, conversion is gradual and almost imperceptible. For others, it's dramatic. For those raised in Christian homes it may not be clear even to them when they first believed. We don't see the Holy Spirit moving, we only feel his effects. As Jesus explained to Nicodemus, "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:7-8).

For me, learning Reformed theology's *ordo salutis*: regeneration first, then faith, allowed me to finally make sense of my conversion experience. First I was given spiritual eyes to see and a heart that repented. But it was two more years before I put my trust in Christ. I had been born again first, only much later did I believe the gospel. For years I had never been able to share what happened to me with my Arminian friends because it didn't fit the theology. When I learned the *ordo salutis*, all the pieces fell into place.

Soon I began to see that all through scripture God is the one who chooses. God chose Seth, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and then a whole people, the Jews, to be his own. We Gentiles are grafted into the Jewish root. In Acts 13 when Paul preached in Antioch, we are told that "as many as were *appointed* to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). It does not say that they chose

God, but that he chose them. God exercises his choosing prerogative in practically every page of the Bible.

Objection 1: If God chooses, doesn't that make us robots?

If God elects us to salvation, doesn't that violate our free will and make us robots who can't really love God because we never had a real choice? Not at all! We've already covered this a bit, but I'd like to add some more explanation.

For me the most helpful way to understand this was when it was explained to me that we always do what we want. I was skeptical of that idea at first. I immediately thought of all kinds of things that I did but didn't want to do. Cleaning the bathroom, for example. Asking forgiveness of those I have offended. Doing what my husband wanted to do instead of what I wanted to do.

When I was a teenager, I used to resentfully brood that life is full of choices but somehow I never got to make any. What I meant was that all the choices available to me were undesirable. I didn't want any of them. I didn't want parents bossing me around. I didn't want to have to deal with the never-ending fallout of divorce. I didn't want to have to change schools and start over. I didn't want to live with the simmering tension in my home. And so on. It felt to me like I didn't really have much choice about anything in my life.

But recognizing the truth that we always do what we want revolutionized my understanding. Even when all the choices available to us are undesirable, usually one choice will be the least bad. That will be the thing that we "want," at least in comparison to the alternatives. The thing I "want" is that thing that seems to me will make me happiest, or at least the least miserable.

Even a prisoner will do what he most wants among the choices available to him. He may want to beat up a fellow prisoner more than he doesn't want to get thrown into solitary for it (or vice versa). In prison they control every aspect of life. And yet prisoners still have choices. Even in solitary, a person can choose how to respond to it.

So we all do have the ability to make real decisions, whether we are spiritually dead or alive. We are not robots. We always do what we most want in order to advance our happiness, and what we want depends upon what we love, or worship. The problem for the unbeliever is that person will never want God. They love other things more, especially themselves. But when God makes a person spiritually alive, he gives them new eyes to see and a new heart with new desires.

When God regenerates a person, as surely as everyone who sees Yosemite Valley will be drawn to Yosemite Valley and love and enjoy the beauty and glory of Yosemite Valley, a spiritually alive person will be drawn to the beauty of God, enjoy his glory, and will love and trust in him. That's why Jesus could say, "All that the Father gives me will come to me..." (John 6:37).

Objection 2: But that's not fair.

In addition to prizing free will, to Arminians it just doesn't seem right that a loving God would elect some to salvation and leave the rest of humanity in their sins. What kind of love is that?

This objection springs from our sense of justice. Especially in our culture that prizes equality and democracy, it just seems obvious to us that if a loving and just God chooses anyone, he must choose everyone. Otherwise he is not generous and kind and good. He's not even just. Or so it seems.

Paul anticipates this objection when he tackles the topic of election in Romans 9 after he declares that God "has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." But, "You will say to me then, why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" In other words, if God chooses whom he will save, how can he hold people responsible for the fact that God didn't choose them? Paul's answer is sharp and direct: "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?'" This is not a new concept; Paul here is quoting from Isaiah 29:16: "Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, 'He did not make me'; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, 'He has no understanding'?" The idea that the clay should pass judgement on the potter is absurd.

I remember the first time I encountered that text. It was perplexing and seemed awfully harsh. No wonder people want to add the interpretation that God looks into the future and chooses those he knows will choose him. But that's not what the text says. The text says that God has the right to do whatever he wants with his creation. Doesn't he?

The very idea that sinful man should presume to judge God is itself a sinful affront. How wicked and arrogant to dare to pass judgement on the holy God who created us! Paul is saying, don't you know who you are talking to?

God created the universe, and he defines justice. He *is* justice. If we don't like something God says or does, *we* are wrong, not God. It may be that our understanding is flawed or possibly because our pride resists it. Either way, we are in no position to judge God. In Romans 9:22-24 Paul boldly asserts this rather shocking claim:

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

It seems that God wants to make his glory known, both by preparing vessels of mercy and by preparing vessels of wrath. Paul is not embarrassed to say so.

These doctrines *are* hard at first. Most of us have to wrestle with them, because we tend to have a far too high a view of ourselves and far too low a view of God as Creator and Ruler of the universe who does whatever he pleases. It helps to remember:

The Horrid sinfulness of Sin and the Astonishing Love of God

We are not just bumbling schmucks doing the best we can but making mistakes along the way. No: we are cosmic criminals, guilty of treason against the King in everything we say, think and do. In *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis put it this way:

Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realising that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground floor—that is the only way out of our ‘hole.’ This process of surrender—this movement full speed astern—is what Christians call repentance.⁷

Or consider this: most kings execute those who rebel against them. Even in America where we don’t have a king but rule ourselves, treason is a capital offense. What does the King of Kings and Lord of Lords do with his treasonous people? He chooses some of those wicked rebels, adopts them as sons and daughters, and gives them a seat at his banquet table. Human kings demand tribute. King Jesus *gives* gifts to unworthy subjects.

Is this not cause for awe, gratitude and overwhelming joy? Jesus tells us, “Fear not, little flock, it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). Indeed, what kind of love is this? Far above all we could ask or imagine, that’s what.

And it turns out that

Arminianism Doesn’t Help God’s Reputation After All

If the Arminian view is true that God draws everyone by his offer of grace, and the only reason everyone isn’t saved is that they freely reject his offer that they are perfectly able to respond to, God *still* doesn’t come out looking all that loving. Think about it: since according to this theology God foreknows who will accept or reject him and elects those who he knows will accept him, why wouldn’t a loving God at least refrain from creating those he knew would reject him? Why create at all those he knows will suffer his wrath in hell?

The answer again would have to be that God has a right to do with his creation as he wants. So either way we end up with God’s right to do what he pleases. It turns out that Arminianism does not solve this problem of maintaining God’s reputation of being loving even though not all

⁷ http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/What_God_Wants_from_You_FullArticle

are saved. In Arminian theology God creates people he knows will end up in hell. In Reformed theology, God chooses some and passes over the rest.

Either position causes us discomfort but in different ways. We should not take our position based upon how we feel, but on scripture. For me, seeing God's choosing love in scripture is of great comfort and awe, and contributes greatly to my happiness in him.

Hell Makes us all Uncomfortable: The Cross Comforts Us

Most of us, whether Reformed or Arminian, except for the worst unrepentant criminals and tyrants, hate the idea of anyone facing the wrath of God. How do we accept this doctrine of the final destiny of unbelievers, yet still see God as loving? The answer is the Cross.

The Cross shows us God's love, how deeply he identifies with us, how low he stoops to reveal himself to us, and how willing he is to suffer for us and with us. Why? For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the Cross. He did it for joy: for his joy and for ours.

At the Cross, God pardoned us without compromising his justice, and he did it by executing justice on His sinless Son. Since God is triune, this is not cosmic child abuse as foolish people sometimes say. In Christ's willing sacrifice for us, God was in a real sense executing justice upon himself.

We hear about the Cross so much that we get used to it, and sometimes fail to consider and deeply feel what an awe-inspiring act it was.

I think this poem by Edward Shilito beautifully evokes the wonder of the Cross:

Jesus of the Scars

If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow,
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.

The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.

If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,
Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.⁸

Only our God has wounds. His wounds speak to our wounds. Jesus understands our suffering because he is God with us, incarnated in a body, living all the difficulties of life yet without sin, then dying a torturous death and absorbing God's wrath against all wickedness into himself. What kind of King is this? No human being would ever think this up. How could we ever question his goodness and love?

Mercy or Justice, Never Injustice

God is under no obligation to save everyone. It's stunning that God would forgive *anyone*. But he is so generous and kind that he elects some to receive mercy.

When God passes by others and does not give them this gift, he does them no wrong. They receive justice. Nobody gets injustice. This should cause us to overflow with joyful gratitude, because if he had not chosen us, we would never have chosen him, and we too would have received the just wrath of God for our rebellion.

The wrath of God is a beautiful thing, essential to his holy character. It glorifies him in his justice, and helps us to know that one day every wrong will be made right. Every sin ever committed will be punished. This is a great comfort to those who have been victimized, and for all of us who groan under the wickedness and misery of this world. Murderers, rapists, child abusers, thieves, malicious gossips, false witnesses, betrayers, and so on, may get away with it now, but judgment day is coming. Either we are in Christ, and Christ paid our debt, or we will face God's wrath ourselves. He didn't have to forgive us. Justice is fair. Mercy is amazing.

What if I'm not Elect?

Sometimes people worry that they aren't of the elect, and that even though they want to be in the kingdom, they will be rejected because God didn't choose them. If you are drawn to Christ, that is evidence that you are elect. Otherwise you wouldn't care. You would be indifferent or hostile.

It is possible for us to deceive ourselves, believing we are saved when we are not. The Bible tells us to examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith. We've had some recent well-known people walk away, so it's not something to take lightly. But worrying about whether you are elect is the opposite of believing you are saved when you are not. Your very concern that you might not be elect should offer comfort to you that you *are* a child of God.

⁸ <https://www.godforusministries.com/o-wide-embracing-wondrous-love/2019/4/18/wounds-that-speak>

If this doubt happens to you, turn to Christ. The answer to every problem of unbelief is to repent and believe the gospel. Hope in Christ, not yourself. Jesus said in John 6:37, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out." You have the Lord's word that whoever comes to him he will never cast out. Go to him in confidence that he will accept you.

If you worry that your sins have separated you from God, remember that if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous.⁹ He is our defense attorney in the courtroom of God. Satan is the prosecutor, the accuser. Christ our advocate answers: she is mine; I paid her debt in my own blood. He intercedes for us with the Father, the Judge, telling him to charge our sins to his account. To gain assurance, go to Christ and comfort yourself with the promises of scripture. Feed yourself on the promises of God until your heart is at ease. Then do what Jesus told so many that he healed: go and sin no more.

The answer to every worry is to turn to Christ and believe the gospel. We live by grace through faith in him. "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Oh happy news!

How Does God's Sovereignty in Salvation Make Us Happy? Five Points

I hope you feel happier already just thinking about how wonderful God is, and how he saves us on his own initiative, not ours. I believe that the Reformed view of sovereignty is not only most faithful to the whole counsel of God as revealed in scripture, but also leads to greater joy, peace, and happiness than a lesser view of his sovereignty.

Here are five more reasons why God's sovereignty over salvation makes us happy:

1. If God chose me first, he will surely complete the work he began. Paul writes this in Philippians 1:6, "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." Did you get that? Paul is confident, Paul is sure, that God who began a good work will see it through to the end. Our perseverance depends upon God, not us.
2. On the other hand, if I choose God first, how do I know if I have enough faith, or authentic faith? The Arminian view tempts me to legalism, to the burden of working to prove that my faith is sufficient and real. Yet Galatians teaches us that trying to earn God's approval puts us out of grace and back under the law; our salvation is actually jeopardized.

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." Now it is evident that no one is justified before

⁹ 1John 2:1

God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” (Gal. 3:10-12)

Relying on our good works puts us back under the curse. We don’t want to go there.

In addition, if I choose first, then I must keep on choosing. What if I stop choosing and walk away?

All of this causes anxiety. How can I be happy if I am anxious every day that I could lose my salvation? The implications of believing that we chose God first steals our joy. Those with the most sensitive consciences and temperaments will suffer most from this.

Rather, knowing that God chose me first, that he is the author and finisher of my faith¹⁰ gives me assurance. I can rest in his grace, understanding that I did nothing to earn his favor in the first place, and there is nothing I can do to make him love me more. Neither can anything separate me from his love. Sin brings discipline, but never rejection. “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ” (Romans 8:1). The true gospel is truly Good News of Great Joy: we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, beginning with God’s electing love.

3. In Arminianism, I may feel less grateful and almost expect God to accept me because he’s God and, well, that’s his job, to love everyone. I might consider myself wiser and more moral than unbelievers because I trusted Christ. I am tempted to see my faith as a gift *to* God, rather than as a gift *from* God. All of these things puff me up in my pride, and pride is the fundamental sin of all us.

By contrast, if God chooses first, I am humbled, then overwhelmed with awe, gratitude, and joy that God chose to bring me into his kingdom.

4. If God offers the same salvation to all as in Arminianism, then his love is impersonal. God either savingly loves all humanity but no one in particular, or he loves in particular his elect and passes over the rest. In Reformed theology, God’s love is personal. He chose me. And he chose you.¹¹

5. To think that the God of the universe set his love on you and committed all of his omnipotent power to bringing you safely to his heavenly kingdom, is this not cause for great joy?

1 John 5:13 says, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.” Yes, we can *know* that we have eternal life, because God chooses. Contemplating God’s sovereignty in our salvation makes and keeps us happy.

¹⁰ Hebrews 12:2

¹¹ Forster, Greg (2012). *Joy of Calvinism*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway. (Chapter 1: God Loves You Personally)

God not only ordains our salvation,

God Ordains All Things That Come to Pass

I was first taught that the world is broken by sin and therefore full of meaningless evil. When something terrible happens, whether human evil or natural disaster, God has nothing to do with it. Remember the devastating tsunami in Indonesia of 2004? Many pastors interviewed in the media rushed to insist that God did not cause or ordain the tsunami.

I understand the desire to protect God's reputation. After all, what kind of God would decree evil? It seems right at first. But it turned out that this did not comfort me. It caused me to live in a sort of free-floating anxiety. In the world terrible stuff happens and God doesn't stop it. He's real sad about it and is ready to help you pick up the pieces of your life, and he does know how to bring good out of evil, but he leaves what happens up to human choice, the devil, and I suppose the laws of nature in their fallen state.

This made me think of the Roadrunner cartoons, where poor Wile E. Coyote was always being squashed flat by a safe falling on his head, dropped from the cliffs above. I call this Roadrunner theology: you never know when a safe is going fall on your head. This cartoon illustrates a similar idea:



Oh, what blessed relief to discover so many scriptures that clearly declare that God controls everything that happens in this world. I would so much rather know that God is behind my suffering, ordaining it for a good purpose, rather than thinking he is standing back and letting it happen.

Scripture teaches that God is Sovereign Over all Things

I am the LORD, and there is no other.
I form light and create darkness;
I make well-being and create calamity;
I am the LORD, who does all these things. (Isaiah 45:7)

Wait, the Lord creates calamity?

Who has spoken and it came to pass,
unless the Lord has commanded it?
Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that good and bad come? (Lamentations 3:38)

God decrees both good and bad?

Yes, he does, and this is a wonderful thing, a source of joy.

Job attributed to God all of the disasters that befell him, and God did not rebuke him for it.

You can do your own scripture search about God's sovereign control over all things. Once you start looking for it, you will find it on nearly every page.

Five ways God's sovereign control over all things makes us happy:

1. We can surrender our burdens to the Lord and let him carry them. We need to live every day, *not* shouldering the burdens of our obligations, but instead surrendering ourselves and our burdens to the One who has the power and who has done everything we need to prove he loves us.¹²

Can you wake up every day, and discipline yourself to NOT shoulder the burdens of your obligations? Surrendering all of ourselves and our concerns to him who loves us makes us happy.

2. When catastrophe hits my life, I want to know it came from the hand of God, not from the meaningless destruction of a broken world. We cannot live in joy when we are afraid, so we battle fear with the truth that God really is in control. We can know that however painful it is, God has ordained it for a good purpose. Even as we groan, we can rejoice that "we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

¹² Tripp, Paul David (2016). *Parenting*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway. (63, 190)

3. Faith is always exercised in the *not* knowing. Have you ever thought about that? We only ever exercise faith when we don't know what will happen. When we don't know what will happen, what are we tempted to do? Anxiety, fear, and trying to control things. This is why faith is hard. It's a heart battle to trust God, who is invisible, against all the threats around us, which are all too visible. When we remember that God is really truly sovereign over all that comes to pass, we can be happy because we live by faith in the one who does know, and is orchestrating all the events of our lives for our good. (In all of these things by the way, I am speaking to myself. Don't get the impression that I have all of this conquered. My heart is a battleground, just like yours.)

4. We all have limitations, things we wish we could do but we just can't. Or things we must do that we wish we didn't have to. There is the limitation of time. Of energy. Of finances. Of our station in life. Some of us live with chronic illnesses and chronic pain. We might long to stay home with our children but need to work. Or we may be home with our children but long for the stimulation of adult company and a paycheck. Some might be experiencing the agony of infertility. Others have difficult marriages or wishing to be married with no one on the horizon. We might have a really boring job or a really stressful one. Families affected by disability have all kinds of difficult limitations in their lives. But when we understand that God sovereignly ordains our limitations for our ultimate good, we can be happy in our limitations rather than chafe against them.

5. Our limitations extend to who we are, our identity. We are given certain gifts and not others. We are good at some things and not so good at others. Seeing this too as God's sovereign ordering of our lives helps us to be content and thankful for the gifts we *have* received, and to develop them for the blessing of others and the glory of God. With this perspective we are freed from envying others who are good at things we aren't, and to rejoice in others' gifts that sparkle like the facets of a precious gem, each reflecting the light of God into one beautiful whole.

God's sovereignty also gives us confidence in ourselves as he made us. We so often compare our insides to other people's outsides, and we always come up short. Instead of feeling inadequate, we can say with confidence: "With God's help I will be all he has made me to be."¹³

Affirming that God ordains all things that come to pass is not a salvation issue, but I believe it is a happiness issue. The more convinced we are that God is in control of every detail of our lives for our good, the more joyfully we can live. Let's pray.

Lord, you have assigned us our portion and our cup,
Give us hearts able to rejoice in your sovereign love that saves us,
And in your divine ordering of our lives for our good and your glory.
In the wonderful name of Jesus I pray, amen.

¹³ <https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/just-in-time>