

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

SOTERIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Salvation

By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone, To the Glory of God Alone

UNIT 1: PROLEGOMENA

The Glory of Salvation

Lesson 2

Salvation in the History of Doctrine

From the Early Church to the Reformation and Beyond

Those Who Forget the Battles of the Past Are Condemned to Lose Them Again

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation”

Key Texts: Romans 1:16–17; 3:21–28; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8–9

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’”

Romans 1:16–17, NASB 1995

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Introduction

There is a maxim, attributed in various forms to philosophers, historians, and statesmen across many centuries, that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it. In the history of Christian doctrine, the principle carries a weight that is not merely philosophical but spiritually urgent. The battles over the doctrine of salvation were not fought once and settled forever in some airtight vault of theological achievement, available for the church to consult at leisure. They were fought in specific historical moments, by specific men and women under the pressure of specific errors, and they must be refought, understood, received, and faithfully transmitted, in every generation. A church that does not know its own theological history is a church perpetually vulnerable to the errors its fathers spent their lives defeating.

This second lesson of the Soteriology series is devoted to a survey of the history of the doctrine of salvation from the apostolic era through the present day. It is not a comprehensive church history; it is a focused theological history, tracing the way in which the church has understood, debated, refined, distorted, and recovered the biblical teaching about how sinners are saved. The story that emerges from that tracing is, in the broadest terms, a story of two recurring trajectories: the trajectory of grace, which locates the whole of salvation in the sovereign, unilateral, inexhaustible mercy of God; and the trajectory of merit, which attempts, in a thousand different forms across a thousand different centuries, to give the human creature some contributory role in the achievement of its own rescue.

These two trajectories are not mere historical curiosities. They represent the two fundamental postures available to the human creature before God: the posture of the one who comes with empty hands and receives everything as gift, and the posture of the one who comes with something to offer and expects some portion of the credit. The biblical testimony, from Genesis to Revelation, is unambiguous in its verdict: the former is the posture of faith; the latter is the posture of religion without the gospel. The history of doctrine is, at its deepest level, the history of the church's ongoing struggle to maintain the former posture against the persistent gravitational pull of the latter, and it is a history from which every student of Soteriology has much to learn and much to be warned.

The outline of this lesson follows the major movements of that history in roughly chronological order: the apostolic proclamation, the early church's soteriological development, the watershed Pelagian controversy of the fifth century, the long medieval drift toward synergism, the Reformation breakthrough and its systematic development in the Reformed tradition, the Synod of Dort and the codification of the doctrines of grace, the Arminian alternative and its theological logic, and the modern landscape of soteriological controversy. At each stopping point, the goal is not merely historical description but theological evaluation, asking not only what was said but whether it faithfully receives the full testimony of Scripture.

A word of pastoral orientation is necessary before we begin. The study of historical theology can produce in the student either humility or pride, depending entirely on the spirit in which it is approached. Rightly received, the history of doctrine humbles us, reminding us that the brightest theological minds in the history of the church have erred, that the most sincere pastoral intentions have sometimes produced the most dangerous doctrinal distortions, and that the grace of God alone has preserved a faithful remnant in every age. Wrongly received, it puffs up, feeding the temptation to regard oneself as finally arrived at a theological clarity that all previous generations lacked. The student who approaches this lesson in the former spirit will find it not merely instructive

but sanctifying; for to see how grace has been obscured and recovered across twenty centuries of church history is to marvel, all the more deeply, at the grace that was never ultimately extinguished.

I. The Apostolic Proclamation

The Gospel as Given, Salvation by Grace Through Faith in the Crucified and Risen Christ

A. The Consistent Testimony of the New Testament

The starting point for any history of the doctrine of salvation must be the apostolic proclamation itself, for it is the standard by which every subsequent development must be measured. The New Testament presents the gospel with a consistency that is all the more remarkable given the diversity of its authors, audiences, and occasions. From Matthew's account of the great commission to the concluding doxology of Jude, the apostolic testimony concerning salvation converges on a single, unwavering center: sinners are saved by the grace of God, through the atoning work of Jesus Christ, received through faith, apart from any merit or achievement of their own.

The Pauline corpus provides the most systematically developed account of this apostolic gospel. In Romans, Paul traces the universal condemnation of humanity (1:18–3:20), the revelation of God's saving righteousness in the gospel (3:21–26), the justification of the ungodly by faith apart from works (3:27–4:8), the imputation of righteousness to those who believe (4:9–25), the peace with God that follows justification (5:1–2), and the unbreakable chain of redemptive purpose that runs from foreknowledge to glorification (8:28–30). In Galatians, he defends this gospel against the Judaizing distortion with an urgency that rises, in the opening verses, to the level of anathema: "If any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!" (Galatians 1:9, NASB 1995). In Ephesians, he grounds the entire saving work in the eternal Trinitarian purpose and summarizes its reception in the most compressed soteriological statement in all of Scripture: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (2:8–9, NASB 1995).

The Gospel of John contributes to this apostolic testimony its own inimitable accent, presenting salvation in terms of new birth from above (John 3:3–8), of the Father's gift of the elect to the Son (6:37–39), of the Son's effective shepherding of all who are given to Him (10:27–29), and of the indwelling Spirit as the One who leads the believer into all truth (16:13). The Petrine letters add the dimension of a living hope grounded in the resurrection (1 Peter 1:3–5) and a salvation guarded by divine power through faith to the last day (1:5). Across every accent and every emphasis, the apostolic proclamation speaks with a single voice: the salvation of sinners is the sovereign achievement of the triune God, accomplished through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, applied by the Holy Spirit, and received through the gift of faith, to the praise of God's glory alone.

The purity and completeness of the apostolic gospel does not mean, however, that the church received it without distortion from the very first generation. The letters of Paul themselves are, in significant measure, acts of doctrinal correction directed against early departures from the apostolic standard. The Galatian churches were already accommodating a synergistic distortion within Paul's own lifetime. The Corinthian correspondence addresses a gospel being subtly reoriented around human wisdom and ecclesiastical personality. The pastoral epistles warn against false teachers whose novelties threatened the depositum fidei entrusted to the church. Every subsequent generation of the church faces the same battle the apostles fought, and the apostolic Scriptures are the same armory from which every successive generation must draw its weapons.

B. The Seeds of Later Controversy

Even within the New Testament's own horizon, the theological pressures that would generate the great soteriological controversies of later centuries are already visible. The tension between grace and human response, between the divine initiative and the creaturely reception, is not introduced into the church's theology by later speculators; it is present in the apostolic letters themselves. Paul tells the Philippians to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" and in the very next breath grounds that imperative in the declaration that "it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12–13, NASB 1995). The tension is not a contradiction; it is the texture of a gospel that is both fully divine in its origin and fully human in its experience. But it is a tension that requires careful theological handling, and the history of the church is, in large measure, the history of the various ways in which that tension has been mishandled.

The Epistle to the Hebrews and the letters of James and Jude each contribute their own soteriological accents that would later prove susceptible to distortion. Hebrews' warning passages (6:4–6; 10:26–31) would be deployed by later theologians as proof that genuine believers could fall from saving grace. James's insistence that "faith without works is dead" (2:26) would be misread, against its own plain intent, as a qualification of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The apostolic Scriptures themselves anticipated, and in anticipating partially addressed, the theological misreadings to which they would be subjected, but they could not prevent those misreadings entirely, and the task of rightly interpreting the apostolic testimony has occupied the church ever since.

What the apostolic period establishes beyond dispute is the standard against which every subsequent soteriological development must be evaluated. That standard is neither a theological tradition nor a confessional document; it is the text of the New Testament itself, read grammatically and historically, in the context of the whole canon of Scripture. Every development surveyed in the remainder of this lesson will be evaluated against that standard, not the standard of a particular theological tradition, but the standard of the apostolic Word, which alone is the *norma normans non normata*: the norm that norms all norms and is normed by none.

II. The Early Church and the Development of Soteriological Reflection

From the Apostolic Fathers Through the Third Century

A. The Apostolic Fathers and the Second Century

The period immediately following the apostolic era, the age of the apostolic fathers and the second-century apologists, witnessed both the preservation and the incipient distortion of the apostolic soteriological testimony. The apostolic fathers (Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, the author of the *Didache*) wrote in pastoral and ecclesiastical contexts rather than systematic ones, and their soteriological statements are accordingly occasional and unsystematic. What is consistent across their writings is a concern to maintain the centrality of Christ's death and resurrection as the basis of salvation, combined with an equally strong emphasis on the moral and sacramental dimensions of the Christian life.

This combination of emphases introduced, in nascent form, the tension that would prove so fateful in later centuries. When Clement of Rome, writing to the Corinthians near the end of the first century, appeals both to

the grace of God and to the importance of righteous conduct as conditions of divine favor, he is not yet articulating a Pelagian soteriology, but he is handling the relationship between grace and obedience with an imprecision that would later be exploited. The second-century apologists (Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch), in their efforts to present Christianity to a Greco-Roman philosophical audience, tended to emphasize the moral excellence of Christian teaching in ways that left the sovereign and transforming work of the Spirit underarticulated.

The role of baptism in early Christian soteriology also requires careful attention at this juncture. The early church's practice of baptism was accompanied, from a very early date, by the language of washing, regeneration, and the forgiveness of sins, language drawn directly from the apostolic testimony (Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21; Titus 3:5). But the question of the precise relationship between the water rite and the spiritual reality it signified was not systematically examined until the Pelagian controversy forced it to the surface. In the meantime, the unreflective association of baptismal water with the conferral of saving grace sowed seeds that would prove extraordinarily difficult to uproot once they had taken root in the liturgical and theological imagination of the church.

The second century also witnessed the emergence of the first significant theological controversies that compelled the church to develop doctrinal precision on questions tangentially related to salvation. The Gnostic systems, with their radical dualism between matter and spirit and their doctrine of salvation as the escape of the divine spark from material imprisonment, forced the church to articulate a gospel that was genuinely incarnational, genuinely historical, and genuinely concerned with the redemption of the whole person, body and soul, rather than merely the liberation of an immaterial inner self. Irenaeus's response to Gnosticism, as we will see below, contained important soteriological insights that the subsequent tradition would develop, even as it also contained lacunae that only the Augustinian and Reformation controversies would ultimately fill.

B. Irenaeus, Tertullian, and the Third-Century Developments

The second and third centuries produced theologians of considerably greater depth and precision than the apostolic fathers, and in their work the outlines of a more developed soteriology begin to emerge. Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130–202), writing against the Gnostic distortions of the gospel that threatened to sever salvation from creation, history, and the material order, articulated a soteriology of recapitulation: Christ, as the second Adam, recapitulated, summed up and reversed, the entire history of human disobedience by His perfect obedience, restoring what Adam had lost and elevating humanity to a participation in the divine life that exceeded even its original created dignity. Irenaeus's instinct was profoundly correct: the salvation accomplished by Christ must be understood in relation to the fall it reverses and the creation it restores. But the precise mechanisms of that salvation, imputation, propitiation, the legal dimensions of atonement, were not yet clearly articulated.

Tertullian of Carthage (c. 155–240), the first significant Latin theologian, introduced into Western theological discourse a vocabulary drawn from Roman legal and commercial categories that would prove both illuminating and, in some respects, misleading. His use of the term *satisfactio*, satisfaction, to describe the human response to sin introduced a concept that would later, in the hands of Anselm, be applied to the work of Christ in ways that Tertullian did not intend. More problematically, Tertullian's developed doctrine of penance, the series of penitential works by which the baptized Christian who had fallen into post-baptismal sin could restore his standing before God, planted in Western Christianity a penitential apparatus that would grow, over the following centuries, into the sacramental system that Luther confronted in the sixteenth century.

Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–254), perhaps the most intellectually gifted of the ante-Nicene theologians, made contributions to soteriology that are simultaneously brilliant and problematic. His development of the ransom theory of the atonement captured something real about the liberation dimension of the gospel while obscuring its satisfaction and substitutionary dimensions. His commitment to universalism, the eventual restoration of all rational creatures to God, represented a departure from the apostolic testimony that would be formally condemned but never entirely suppressed. And his allegorical method of biblical interpretation, whatever its contributions to homiletics, tended to subordinate the plain grammatical-historical sense of the text to a higher spiritual sense that could accommodate almost any theological conclusion. Origen's legacy is a reminder that intellectual brilliance, theological creativity, and genuine piety are not sufficient guarantees of doctrinal fidelity, only patient submission to the full testimony of Scripture in its plain sense can perform that function.

III. The Pelagian Controversy

The Foundational Battle for the Gospel of Sovereign Grace

A. Pelagius and the Assertion of Human Moral Capacity

No controversy in the history of Christian doctrine has more sharply defined the boundaries of the gospel than the Pelagian controversy of the early fifth century. Pelagius (c. 360–418), a British monk of considerable moral seriousness and rhetorical ability who had come to Rome and gained an influential following, was provoked to his characteristic theological position by what he regarded as the moral laxity produced by Augustine's teaching on grace. The specific occasion that tradition records is Augustine's prayer in the Confessions: "Grant what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt", a petition that Pelagius found deeply offensive, because it seemed to him to evacuate human moral responsibility of any genuine content. If grace is required even to obey God's commands, Pelagius reasoned, then the commands themselves lose their moral force, and the human creature is absolved of the very responsibility that makes obedience meaningful.

Pelagius's positive theological commitments followed logically from this initial instinct. He taught that Adam's sin in the garden was a purely personal act that affected Adam alone, leaving his posterity with the same moral capacity with which they were created. Original sin, in Pelagius's account, is transmitted by imitation rather than by nature: subsequent human beings sin because they follow Adam's bad example in a morally corrupting social environment, not because they inherit from Adam a corrupted nature or a guilt imputed to them as members of the human race. Every human being is born, in Pelagius's view, with the full capacity to choose good or evil, and the function of grace is not to transform an incapacitated will but to assist an already capable one, providing the example of Christ, the forgiveness of past sins, and the illumination of divine law as aids to the moral effort that human beings are fully able, in principle, to make without them.

The implications of this position for the whole of Christian soteriology are total and devastating. If human beings are not born with a corrupted nature inherited from Adam, then there is no radical spiritual incapacity that requires the sovereign regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. If grace is merely assistive rather than transforming, then salvation is fundamentally a cooperative achievement in which the decisive contribution belongs to the creature rather than the Creator. And if salvation is a cooperative achievement, then the glory of it cannot belong to God alone; some portion must be credited to the human will that chose and cooperated rightly. Pelagianism,

in other words, is not merely a variant form of Christianity with a slightly different anthropology; it is the negation of the gospel at its root, and this is precisely why Augustine recognized it, from the moment he first encountered it, as a threat not to a peripheral doctrine but to the gospel itself.

It is also important to understand that Pelagianism was not, from the outside, obviously monstrous. It appealed to the moral instincts of sincere Christians who found the Augustinian account of grace dangerously close to the elimination of genuine human responsibility. It appealed to the philosophical instincts of educated people formed by the Stoic and Platonic traditions, for whom the moral life was the exercise of rational self-determination. And it appealed, at a deeper psychological level, to the persistent human desire to be the author of one's own salvation, to have contributed something to the rescue from which one benefits. These same appeals account for the extraordinary resilience of Pelagianism and its variants across the subsequent centuries of church history. The heresy keeps returning not because it is intellectually compelling but because it is psychologically flattering.

B. Augustine and the Triumph of Sovereign Grace

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) stands as the most consequential theologian in the history of the Western church, and nowhere is his theological greatness more evident than in his sustained, relentless, and ultimately triumphant refutation of Pelagianism. Augustine's engagement with Pelagius was not merely academic; it was intensely personal, grounded in his own experience of the grace that had pursued and captured him while he was still in full flight from God, an experience narrated with devastating spiritual honesty in the *Confessions* and with systematic theological precision in the great anti-Pelagian treatises.

Augustine's counter-position rested on a close reading of the Pauline corpus, particularly Romans 5:12–19 and Ephesians 2:1–10, combined with a profound understanding of the will that he had developed in his earlier philosophical works. Against Pelagius's assertion of natural human moral capacity, Augustine argued that Adam's fall had introduced into human nature a radical and inherited corruption from which no individual could extract himself by the exercise of a will that is itself the primary seat of the corruption. The unregenerate will, Augustine insisted, is not merely weak or disadvantaged; it is enslaved. It sins not under external compulsion but by its own deepest inclination, and that inclination, the restless turning of the creature toward itself and away from God, is the defining characteristic of fallen human nature. Only the sovereign, transforming grace of God can redirect that inclination, and it does so not by overriding the will but by changing it, making the sinner willing to come to the One he previously fled.

Augustine's doctrine of predestination followed necessarily from his doctrine of grace. If the grace that saves is genuinely and radically sovereign, if it does not wait upon, respond to, or assist a prior human willingness but creates that willingness from the raw material of dead and enslaved human nature, then it must be directed by a prior divine election that is not conditioned on anything foreseen in the creature. Augustine found this doctrine not in philosophical speculation but in the text of Romans 9:11–16, where Paul grounds the differential salvation of Jacob and Esau not in any foreseen virtue or faith but solely in the sovereign purpose of the God who calls. The election of grace, Augustine argued, is the only account of divine sovereignty that is consistent with the radical account of human incapacity that Paul provides in Ephesians 2:1–5 and Romans 3:10–18.

The councils of Carthage in 416 and 418 formally condemned Pelagianism, and the Council of Ephesus in 431 ratified that condemnation for the universal church. Augustine's theological victory was real and decisive, but it was not total. Semi-Pelagianism, the position associated with John Cassian and the monks of southern Gaul, which

attempted a mediating position between Pelagius and Augustine by affirming original sin and the need for grace while insisting that the first movement toward God originates in the human will rather than in divine election, proved extraordinarily resilient. The Council of Orange in 529 condemned Semi-Pelagianism as well, but the subsequent history of the Western church suggests that the condemnation was more formal than effective. The gravitational pull of synergism has never been definitively expelled from the church's practical and popular theology, and it reasserted itself with particular force in the medieval period that followed.

IV. The Medieval Drift

The Long Erosion of the Gospel Between Augustine and Luther

A. The Sacramental System and the Synergistic Drift

The centuries between the Augustinian triumph and the Reformation are not, as they are sometimes portrayed in Protestant historiography, a uniform darkness from which the Reformers rescued the church. They were centuries of genuine theological achievement: the great Trinitarian and Christological definitions of the ecumenical councils, the monastic movements that preserved learning and pursued holiness, the careful scholastic syntheses of the high medieval period, and the flourishing of biblical commentary and mystical theology. But they were also centuries in which the soteriological clarity of the Augustinian settlement was progressively eroded by the growth of a sacramental system that, in practice if not always in explicit theory, relocated the decisive agent of salvation from the sovereign will of God to the structured operations of the institutional church.

The development of the seven sacraments as the ordinary channels of divine grace, the elaboration of a theology of penance that required specific acts of contrition, confession, and satisfaction for the restoration of post-baptismal sin, the doctrine of purgatory as a place of temporal punishment for sins not fully atoned for in this life, and the invention of indulgences as a mechanism for reducing that temporal punishment through prescribed works and payments, each of these developments was the product of genuine pastoral and theological intentions. But the cumulative effect of the whole system was a soteriology in which salvation was not so much received from the sovereign grace of God as achieved through the faithful navigation of an institutional apparatus. The sinner's cooperation with infused grace, sustained through the sacramental life of the church, was the engine of a salvation whose completion was perpetually deferred, perpetually contingent, and perpetually uncertain.

The theological giants of the high medieval period, Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), Peter Lombard (c. 1096–1160), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Duns Scotus (1266–1308), and William of Ockham (c. 1287–1347), each contributed in different ways to the soteriological framework within which Luther would be formed. Anselm's satisfaction theory of the atonement, the idea that Christ's death provided the satisfaction owed to God's honor that fallen humanity could not render, was a genuine advance over the ransom theory and anticipated aspects of the Reformation's penal substitutionary account. But Anselm's framework operated within a feudal model of honor and debt that left space for the subsequent development of a system in which the benefits of Christ's satisfaction were distributed through the sacramental treasury of the church.

Thomas Aquinas represents perhaps the most sophisticated medieval attempt to integrate Augustinian grace with the church's sacramental practice and Aristotelian philosophical categories. Aquinas affirmed the necessity of

grace for salvation and the priority of divine initiative in the act of justification, but he understood justification itself as an infusion of sanctifying grace into the soul that actually changes the soul's moral quality, rather than as a forensic declaration of righteousness on the basis of imputed merit. The distinction is critical: on the Thomistic account, justification produces a change in the sinner's intrinsic moral character, which then becomes the ground (in a secondary sense) of the sinner's acceptance by God. The Reformation's insistence that justification is a forensic declaration, a verdict pronounced over the sinner on the basis of a righteousness that is alien to him, imputed rather than infused, was, at its core, a rejection of this Thomistic synthesis and a return to the plain grammatical-historical sense of the Pauline texts.

B. The Late Medieval Crisis and Luther's Discovery

By the late medieval period, the accumulated weight of the sacramental and penitential system had produced what Luther himself experienced as a spiritual crisis of the first order. The young Augustinian friar who entered the monastery in 1505 had been formed in a theological environment, shaped particularly by the nominalist theology of Gabriel Biel and the broader *via moderna* tradition, in which salvation was understood as a cooperative achievement governed by the axiom: to those who do what lies within them, God does not deny grace. The responsibility placed upon the individual was crushing: one must do one's moral best, and God would then supply the grace necessary to supplement that best and bring it to the level required for acceptance. Luther did his best, with a ferocity and conscientiousness that exhausted his confessors. And it was never enough. The holy God remained inaccessible, the conscience remained unappeased, and the gospel remained hidden behind a system that made salvation the reward of a sincerity that no honest soul could be certain it possessed.

Luther's breakthrough in the tower of the Wittenberg monastery, the moment that tradition associates with his reading of Romans 1:17 and his realization that "the righteousness of God" in that verse is not the righteousness by which God judges sinners but the righteousness by which He justifies them through the gift of faith, was not merely a personal spiritual experience. It was a doctrinal discovery of epoch-defining significance. Luther had found in the text of Paul what the medieval tradition had buried: the teaching that a sinner is declared righteous before God not by the infusion of a righteousness that he must then sustain and supplement by cooperation with grace, but by the imputation of a righteousness that is entirely Christ's, entirely complete, and entirely free. The gospel was not a demand but a gift. Righteousness was not an achievement but a reception. And the God who had terrified Luther by His holiness turned out to be the same God who, in that holiness, had provided in Christ precisely the righteousness that holiness required.

This personal experience of liberation was inseparable, in Luther's mind, from the exegetical discovery that produced it. Luther's Reformation was always, at its core, a movement of biblical interpretation, a return to the text of Scripture against the weight of a tradition that had, over the course of a thousand years, accumulated layers of commentary, canon law, sacramental theology, and hierarchical authority that had buried the apostolic gospel beneath them. When Luther nailed the ninety-five theses, he was not simply a disgruntled reformer venting institutional frustrations; he was a biblical theologian who had discovered, in the text of Romans, a gospel that the institutional church of his day was actively obscuring, and who could not, in good conscience, remain silent about the difference.

V. The Reformation and the Recovery of the Gospel

Luther, Calvin, and the Systematic Development of Reformed Soteriology

A. *Luther and the Recovery of Justification by Faith Alone*

Martin Luther's Reformation was, from its inception, a soteriological revolution. The ninety-five theses of 1517, though focused immediately on the specific question of indulgences, were grounded in a theological reorientation that touched the very foundation of the medieval system: if a sinner is justified by the imputation of Christ's righteousness received through faith alone, then the entire apparatus by which the medieval church claimed to distribute, manage, and supplement the grace necessary for salvation, indulgences, purgatory, the treasury of merit, the penitential system, is not merely abused but misconceived at its root. Luther recognized this with the clarity of a man who had lived on the wrong side of the error, and he pressed the logic of his discovery with the unrelenting energy of someone who had personally experienced what was at stake.

Luther's two great Reformation treatises of 1520, *The Freedom of a Christian* and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, developed the positive and negative dimensions of his soteriological breakthrough with characteristic brilliance. *The Freedom of a Christian* articulated the double grace of justification: the believer receives Christ's righteousness as his own and gives to Christ his sin, in a "happy exchange" (*fröhlicher Wechsel*) that is the heart of the gospel. Five years later, in *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), Luther produced what he himself regarded as his most important work: the definitive Reformation account of human moral inability, written against Erasmus's defense of free will, establishing on exegetical and theological grounds that the decisive act in salvation belongs not to the sinner's will but to the sovereign grace of God. Against Erasmus's polite, humanistic account of a cooperative soteriology, Luther insisted with characteristic bluntness that the will of the unregenerate person, when it comes to its own salvation, is not free but bound, bound by the very nature it has received from Adam and incapable, by its own power, of turning toward the God from whom it has inherited the disposition to flee.

Luther's *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article of justification by which the church stands or falls, was not a rhetorical flourish but a precise theological claim. The church that loses justification by faith alone does not merely misplace a doctrinal detail; it loses the gospel itself. For the gospel is not a general announcement of divine benevolence or an invitation to moral improvement; it is the specific, particular, legally grounded declaration that the guilt of sinners has been imputed to Christ and the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to sinners, on the basis of which God pronounces the justifying verdict: not guilty, but righteous in My sight. Strip away that specific declaration, and you are left with something less than the gospel, however sincerely it may be proclaimed, however attractively it may be packaged, and however many people it may enlist in the life of the church.

B. *Calvin and the Systematization of Reformed Soteriology*

John Calvin (1509–1564) received the Reformation's soteriological breakthrough from Luther and developed it into the most comprehensive and systematically coherent account of the doctrine of salvation that the Protestant tradition has produced. Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, growing from a brief catechetical manual in 1536 to the massive four-book systematic theology of the final 1559 edition, devoted its longest and most richly developed book (Book III) to the application of the grace of Christ to the believing soul. In that book, Calvin traced the full *ordo salutis* with a precision and a pastoral warmth that set the standard for all subsequent Reformed

soteriology: union with Christ as the ground of all saving benefits, faith as the instrument of that union, justification as the forensic declaration of righteousness on the basis of imputed merit, sanctification as the Spirit's progressive transformation of the regenerate heart, and perseverance as the certain completion of what sovereign election began.

Calvin's distinctive contribution to the soteriological discussion was his insistence on union with Christ as the organizing category of the entire doctrine of salvation. Where Luther's primary emphasis had been on justification, the forensic declaration of righteousness, Calvin insisted that justification and sanctification, though distinct, could not be separated because both flow from the same union with Christ. The sinner who is united to Christ by faith receives both the forgiveness of his sins (justification) and the transforming power of Christ's life (sanctification) simultaneously. To pursue justification without sanctification is to seek half of Christ; to pursue sanctification without justification is to seek the fruit without the root. Calvin's synthesis, the doctrine of the duplex gratia, the double grace, provided the Reformed tradition with a framework for holding together the full scope of God's saving work in a way that neither separated what God had joined nor confused what He had distinguished.

Calvin's treatment of election and predestination in the Institutes (III.21–24) remains the most exegetically sustained and pastorally oriented exposition of the doctrine in the history of theology. Calvin did not begin with predestination as a logical deduction from divine sovereignty; he arrived at it exegetically, as the necessary explanation for the differential reception of the gospel. Why do some believe and others not, when the gospel is preached to both? Not because of any foreseen quality in the believer, for that would make election contingent on something in the creature rather than something in God. The answer is election: God's sovereign and unconditional choice of those who will be saved, grounded in no consideration external to Himself and certain of its accomplishment through the effectual work of the Spirit. This doctrine, Calvin insisted, is not a subject for idle speculation but for pastoral comfort: the believer who knows that his salvation rests in the sovereign and immutable will of God, rather than in the fluctuating quality of his own faith and obedience, has a foundation for assurance that nothing in his experience can undermine.

VI. The Synod of Dort and the Arminian Challenge

The Doctrines of Grace Codified and Contested

A. Arminianism and the Return of Synergism

The Reformation's recovery of sovereign grace did not go unopposed within the Protestant tradition itself. Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), a Dutch Reformed pastor and theologian who had been trained in the Calvinist tradition, came over the course of his ministry to profound theological reservations about the standard Reformed account of election, the extent of the atonement, and the irresistibility of grace. His concerns were not primarily speculative; they were pastoral. He believed that the Calvinist doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace, as he understood them, implied a God who was the ultimate author of sin and damnation, and that they rendered the sincere gospel offer incoherent: how can God genuinely invite all people to believe if He has decreed that only some will be given the capacity to do so?

Arminius's theological alternative, developed by his followers in the Remonstrance of 1610, proposed a revised soteriology organized around the concept of prevenient grace and conditional election. On the Arminian account,

God foreknows who will freely choose to believe and elects those individuals on the basis of that foreseen faith. The atonement was universal in its intent, providing a sufficient basis for the salvation of all people rather than the certain salvation of the elect. Grace was resistible: the Spirit's work in the heart could be and frequently was genuinely refused by the human will. And the perseverance of the believer was conditional on the maintenance of faith: it was possible for a genuinely regenerate person to fall finally and fatally from saving grace. Each of these positions represented a direct reversal of the corresponding Calvinist affirmation, and taken together they constituted a coherent but fundamentally synergistic soteriology, one in which the decisive factor in the reception of salvation was the human will's free choice to cooperate with an offered grace.

The Arminian system has a surface plausibility that accounts for its enduring appeal. It seems to resolve the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility by simply limiting the former: God has done everything necessary to make salvation possible for everyone; human beings determine by their own free choice who actually receives it. This resolution feels morally intuitive and eliminates the theological discomfort that the doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace produce in those who feel them to be incompatible with a genuinely benevolent God. But the Reformed tradition identified a fatal flaw in this apparently tidy resolution: it makes salvation ultimately dependent on the creature's choice rather than the Creator's grace, and it therefore cannot avoid attributing to the creature the decisive role in its own rescue, which is precisely the synergistic error that Augustine spent his life refuting and Paul spent his letters forestalling.

The practical pastoral consequences of the Arminian system are no less significant than its theological problems. A soteriology that grounds assurance in the believer's continued free choice to maintain faith inevitably produces an anxious Christianity, one in which the believer's confidence before God fluctuates with the perceived quality of his spiritual experience, and in which the final question of eternal destiny is never definitively settled this side of the grave. By contrast, the Reformed soteriology that grounds assurance in the sovereign and immutable purpose of the God who elected, called, justified, and will certainly glorify His people provides a foundation for the peace with God that Paul describes in Romans 5:1, not a presumptuous carelessness but a settled, gospel-grounded confidence that no fluctuation of experience and no power in heaven or earth can overthrow.

B. The Synod of Dort and the Five Points

The Synod of Dort (1618–1619), convened by the Reformed churches of the Netherlands with delegates from Reformed churches across Europe, addressed the Arminian challenge with systematic theological precision, producing in the Canons of Dort the most carefully argued and exegetically grounded confessional statement of the doctrines of grace in the history of the church. The five heads of doctrine addressed by the Canons correspond to the five points of the Remonstrance: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited (or Definite) Atonement, Irresistible (or Efficacious) Grace, and the Perseverance of the Saints, the five doctrines summarized by the acronym TULIP.

Total Depravity affirms that the fall of Adam has corrupted every faculty of human nature so that the unregenerate person is entirely incapable of turning to God in genuine repentance and faith without the supernatural work of regeneration. Unconditional Election affirms that God's choice of those who will be saved is not conditioned on any foreseen faith, merit, or virtue in those chosen, but rests entirely on the sovereign good pleasure of His will. Limited (or Definite) Atonement affirms that Christ's atoning death was designed to secure the certain salvation of the elect rather than to provide a merely possible salvation for all people without distinction, a doctrine that

preserves both the efficacy of the atonement and the integrity of the Trinitarian design, since the Father sent the Son to redeem the very people the Spirit would effectually apply that redemption to.

Irresistible (or Efficacious) Grace affirms that the effectual call of the Holy Spirit is a sovereign work that infallibly produces its intended effect, not by overriding the will but by transforming it, so that those who are effectually called come freely and willingly to the Savior they previously rejected. Perseverance of the Saints affirms that all who are truly regenerated by the Spirit of God will persevere in faith and holiness to the end, preserved not by the strength of their own resolution but by the sovereign and unbreakable commitment of the God who called them. Taken together, the five points of Dort constitute a comprehensive account of sovereign grace in salvation, one that has proven, across the four centuries since Dort, to be among the most exegetically defensible and pastorally powerful soteriological frameworks the church has ever produced.

VII. The Modern Landscape

Contemporary Challenges and the Continuing Necessity of Reformation Soteriology

A. The New Perspective on Paul and the Federal Vision

The twentieth century produced two significant challenges to the Reformation's account of Pauline soteriology that demand careful attention from every student of Soteriology. The New Perspective on Paul (NPP), associated primarily with E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright, emerged from a reassessment of first-century Judaism that Sanders articulated in his 1977 work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Sanders argued that the Judaism that Paul opposed was not the legalistic, merit-based soteriology that the Reformers described, a Judaism in which salvation was earned by the meticulous performance of the Torah, but a "covenantal nomism" in which Jewish people understood themselves to be inside the covenant by grace and to maintain that standing through obedience. If Paul was not opposing a merit-based soteriology, the argument runs, then his teaching on justification by faith was not primarily about the individual sinner's standing before God but about the social question of who belongs to the covenant community.

The New Perspective, in its various forms, tends to redefine "works of the law" in Paul not as meritorious deeds by which one earns divine favor but as Jewish identity markers, circumcision, dietary laws, Sabbath observance, that functioned as boundary markers distinguishing Jews from Gentiles. N.T. Wright, the most theologically sophisticated NPP advocate, has argued that the Reformation's doctrine of imputation, the crediting of Christ's righteousness to the believer's account, does not appear in Paul as a formal category, and that "the righteousness of God" in Paul refers to the divine covenant faithfulness rather than to a righteousness that is transferred to the believer. The Reformed response to the New Perspective has been extensive and, in the judgment of this series, decisive. While the NPP has helpfully corrected a caricature of first-century Judaism and illuminated the ecclesiological dimensions of Paul's soteriology, it has done so at the cost of the soteriological core that the Reformation rightly identified as Paul's central concern.

The grammatical-historical exegesis of Romans 3:21–28, 4:1–25, and Galatians 2:15–3:14 strongly supports the conclusion that Paul's argument against justification by works is indeed about the individual sinner's standing before God, that imputation is a formal and central Pauline category (Romans 4:3–6, 11, 22–24), and that the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel is precisely the righteousness that God gives to the sinner through

faith in Christ. The New Perspective has generated important exegetical conversations, but it has not overthrown the Reformation's reading of Paul, and the church is unwise to abandon the Reformation's soteriological clarity on the basis of its arguments. A theology that cannot say, with Paul, that a person "is justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (Romans 3:28, NASB 1995), meaning the individual sinner's forensic acquittal before the divine tribunal, has lost the gospel, whatever else it may have gained.

B. The Present Necessity of Reformation Soteriology

The Federal Vision controversy that emerged in the early twenty-first century within Reformed and Presbyterian churches represents a different kind of challenge, one that comes from within the confessional Reformed tradition rather than from outside it. Federal Vision theology proposed a revisionist account of justification, covenant, and the relationship between faith and works that its critics identified as a functional return to the categories of the Roman Catholic and medieval traditions that the Reformation had rejected. The major Reformed denominations that addressed the controversy formally concluded that the Federal Vision's proposals were inconsistent with the Westminster Standards and the Reformation's account of the gospel, and those conclusions are, in the judgment of this series, correct.

The broader modern landscape of evangelical Soteriology is characterized by a widespread and largely unreflective Arminianism that has become so thoroughly embedded in popular preaching, evangelistic practice, and worship culture that most evangelicals are unaware that it has a name or a history. The default evangelical assumption, that God has done everything possible to make salvation available and that human beings decide, by a free act of unconditioned will, whether to receive it, is not the apostolic gospel; it is the Arminian revision of the Reformation's recovery of the apostolic gospel. This does not mean that every person who holds these assumptions is not a genuine Christian; it means that the church in which these assumptions go unexamined and unchallenged is a church that has functionally relocated the decisive act of salvation from the sovereign will of God to the autonomous choice of the human creature, with all the pastoral and doxological impoverishment that this relocation entails.

The study of the history of the doctrine of salvation is, therefore, not an antiquarian exercise. It is a navigation tool for a church that is perpetually in danger of losing its bearings on the most important question it faces: how are sinners saved? The answer the church has given to that question, in every century, in every tradition, under every cultural pressure, has determined the shape of its preaching, the depth of its worship, the quality of its assurance, and the authenticity of its mission. The Reformed soteriology that this series will expound is not the private property of a theological tradition; it is the church's best and most faithful attempt to receive and transmit the apostolic testimony concerning the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And the history surveyed in this lesson is the documentation of what is gained when that testimony is faithfully received, and what is lost when it is not.

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

Romans 1:16, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Pelagianism	The theological system of Pelagius (c. 360–418), who taught that Adam’s sin affected only Adam himself, that human beings are born morally neutral without original sin, that the human will retains full capacity to choose good without supernatural grace, and that grace is merely external assistance rather than internal transformation. Condemned at the Councils of Carthage (418) and Ephesus (431). Pelagianism denies the necessity of sovereign regenerating grace and renders the cross unnecessary as a propitiatory sacrifice for inherited guilt.
Semi-Pelagianism	A mediating position between Pelagius and Augustine, associated with John Cassian and the monks of southern Gaul, which affirmed original sin and the necessity of grace while insisting that the first movement toward God originates in the human will rather than in divine election. God then responds to that initial human reaching with completing grace. Condemned at the Council of Orange (529). Semi-Pelagianism is the functional default soteriology of much of contemporary popular evangelicalism, though rarely identified by name.
Synergism	From the Greek <i>syn</i> (together) and <i>ergon</i> (work). Any theological account of salvation that attributes a contributory role to the human will in the procurement of saving grace, whether in the initial act of regeneration, the appropriation of justifying faith, or the maintenance of one’s standing before God. Arminianism is the most historically significant form of Protestant synergism. Contrasted with monergism, the affirmation that regeneration is entirely the sovereign work of God alone.
Infused Righteousness	The Roman Catholic doctrine that justification involves the actual transformation of the sinner’s moral character through the infusion of sanctifying grace, mediated through the sacraments. The justified person is actually made righteous intrinsically, and this intrinsic righteousness becomes (in a secondary sense) the basis of acceptance before God. The Reformation rejected infused righteousness in favor of imputed righteousness, the forensic crediting of Christ’s alien, external, perfect righteousness to the sinner’s account on the basis of faith alone.
Imputed Righteousness	The Reformation doctrine that justification involves the legal crediting of Christ’s perfect righteousness to the believer’s account, not a transformation of the believer’s intrinsic moral character. This righteousness is “alien”, belonging to Christ, not to the believer, and is received through faith alone. The Pauline foundation is Romans 4:3–6 and 2 Corinthians 5:21. Imputed righteousness means the believer’s standing before God is as secure as Christ’s own record, since it is Christ’s own record credited to the believer.
Recapitulation	The soteriological theme developed by Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130–202) to describe Christ’s work as the second Adam, summing up and reversing the entire history of human disobedience through His own perfect obedience. Christ recapitulates (re-heads) humanity, undoing at each point what Adam had done. While Irenaeus’s recapitulation theory captured important biblical themes (Romans 5:12–19; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22), it required the further development of Anselm, Luther, and Calvin to specify the precise forensic and substitutionary mechanisms by which recapitulation is accomplished.
Canons of Dort	The formal doctrinal decisions of the Synod of Dort (1618–1619), convened to address the Arminian Remonstrance. The Canons articulate the five heads of the doctrines of grace (TULIP): Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Definite Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints. Each head of doctrine includes both positive affirmations and explicit rejections of Arminian errors. The Canons of Dort remain one of the Three Forms of Unity of the Dutch Reformed churches and are widely recognized as among the most exegetically grounded soteriological confessions ever produced.

Arminianism	The soteriological system derived from the theology of Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) and codified in the Remonstrance of 1610. Key tenets: election conditioned on foreseen faith (prescient election); universal atonement; resistible grace; and the possibility of final apostasy by genuine believers. Formally rejected by the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) as inconsistent with Scripture and the Reformed confessions. Remains the dominant popular soteriology of much of contemporary evangelicalism.
New Perspective on Paul	A scholarly movement in New Testament studies associated with E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright that reinterprets Paul’s teaching on justification as primarily concerned with Jewish-Gentile relations in the covenant community rather than the individual sinner’s standing before God. The NPP redefines “works of the law” as Jewish identity markers and challenges the Reformation’s doctrine of imputed righteousness. Extensively critiqued and largely rejected by confessional Reformed exegetes as misreading Paul’s central soteriological concern.
Covenantal Nomism	The term coined by E.P. Sanders to describe what he argued was the pattern of religion in first-century Judaism: one enters the covenant by grace (election) and maintains one’s standing within it through obedience to the Torah (nomism). Sanders used this concept to argue that Paul was not opposing a merit-based soteriology but a system of boundary maintenance. The Reformed response notes that even if Sanders’s historical description of Judaism is partially correct, Paul’s argument in Romans and Galatians addresses the universal human problem of standing before God’s judgment, a problem that covenantal nomism, in any form, cannot resolve.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the history of the doctrine of salvation is not an interesting backdrop to the real business of exegesis and systematic theology but an indispensable dimension of theological formation itself. The church does not re-read the Bible in a historical vacuum; she reads it as the inheritor of twenty centuries of doctrinal reflection, controversy, and confession. To ignore that inheritance is not theological freshness; it is theological naivety, the naivety of someone who reinvents the wheel and calls it a discovery. The student who understands the history of Soteriology will read Paul's letter to the Romans differently than the student who does not, because she will recognize in Paul's argument against justification by works the same synergistic instinct that Pelagius articulated, that the medieval system enshrined, and that the Arminian Remonstrance revived, and she will feel the force of Paul's refutation with the accumulated weight of those fifteen centuries pressing upon it.

We must also believe that the doctrinal battles summarized in this lesson were not battles about peripheral matters of theological housekeeping. They were battles about the gospel itself, about whether the salvation of a sinner is the sovereign achievement of the triune God or the cooperative product of divine grace and human will. That question is not merely an academic one; it is the question whose answer determines the shape of everything: the character of preaching, the nature of evangelism, the ground of assurance, and the orientation of worship. Believe rightly on this question, and everything else in the Christian life tends toward its proper shape. Believe wrongly, and the distortion propagates through the entire system.

We must believe, thirdly, that the recovery of the gospel in every generation requires the willingness to identify and name error, not merely to commend truth. Augustine named Pelagius. Luther named Rome. The Synod of Dort named the Remonstrance. This is not unkindness; it is the pastoral responsibility of those who have been entrusted with the deposit of faith. A church that cannot name the specific theological errors that threaten the gospel in its own moment is a church that has confused tolerance with faithfulness, and it will pay for that confusion in the pastoral devastation that always follows the loss of the gospel's clarity. Naming error is not graceless; it is the most loving thing a teacher can do for students who are in danger of receiving a distorted gospel and building their eternal hope upon it.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The appropriate emotional response to the history of Soteriology involves at least three distinct registers that must be held together. The first is gratitude, gratitude to God for the faithfulness with which He has preserved the testimony of sovereign grace through every century of the church's history, against every doctrinal distortion and every cultural pressure. The gospel was not lost in the fifth century, or the ninth, or the fifteenth. It was obscured, distorted, and suppressed in various ways and to various degrees, but it was never extinguished, and the Reformation was not the invention of the gospel but its recovery. That recovery is itself a work of sovereign grace, and the believer who understands it will worship the God who preserved it.

The second emotional register is sobriety, the sober recognition that the errors this lesson describes were not committed by malicious people who set out to destroy the gospel. Pelagius was, by all accounts, a man of genuine moral seriousness and pastoral concern. The medieval theologians who elaborated the sacramental system were, many of them, brilliant and devout. The Arminian Remonstrants were sincere pastors with genuine concern for

the integrity of the gospel offer. The lesson to draw from this is not that sincerity protects against error but that it does not, and that the surest protection against theological error is not moral seriousness or scholarly achievement but patient, humble, churchly submission to the full testimony of Scripture as it has been received and expounded in the great confessions of the Reformed tradition.

The third register is desire, a desire to know, with the precision and the personal urgency of those who have seen what is at stake, the full and unguarded account of sovereign grace in salvation. This is not merely the desire of a student who wants to master a body of material; it is the desire of a soul that has understood, through the mirror of history, how easily the gospel can be obscured and how much is lost when it is. That kind of desire clings to the clarity of the gospel with the urgency of someone who has read the story of how it was nearly lost, and who does not intend to be among those who lose it again.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read Augustine's Confessions, Books I–IX, as a primary source for understanding both the personal experience and the theological substance of the Augustinian doctrine of grace. Pay particular attention to Augustine's account of his own conversion in Books VII–VIII, noting the ways in which his experience of divine grace confirmed and deepened his theological convictions about sovereign initiative and human inability. As you read, ask: does Augustine's account of how God saved him match the Pauline account of how God saves sinners?
- Read the Canons of Dort in their entirety, including both the positive articles and the rejections of errors. Note the careful distinction the Canons draw between what they affirm and what they reject, and observe the consistent exegetical grounding of each article. Ask: are the Canons' affirmations and rejections recognizable in your own theological context? Which of the Arminian errors rejected by the Canons is most prevalent in the popular Christianity you encounter, and what pastoral consequences has that error produced?
- Read Luther's preface to his commentary on the Letter to the Romans (1522), in which he provides a compressed but brilliant account of the Reformation's understanding of justification, grace, faith, and righteousness. Ask: which reading of Paul does justice to the full range of Pauline vocabulary, *hamartia*, *dikaiosynē*, *pistis*, *charis*, *logizomai*? Which account makes better sense of Paul's sustained argument across Romans 1–8?
- Evaluate the implicit soteriology of the worship music, evangelistic materials, and preaching you regularly encounter. Does the language of salvation in those sources reflect monergism or synergism? Is conversion presented as the sovereign work of a God who regenerates dead sinners, or as the decision of a person who responds to an attractive offer? Is assurance grounded in the objective promise of God, or in the quality of one's own spiritual experience? Bring specific examples to your study group and discuss what theological tradition they reflect and what pastoral consequences follow from their assumptions.
- Pray for theological clarity in your own preaching, teaching, or spiritual conversation. Ask the Spirit to guard you against the subtle synergism that is the default setting of fallen human intuition, and to cultivate in you the settled confidence that the gospel you proclaim is the announcement of what God has accomplished, not a negotiation about what God is willing to do if the sinner will cooperate. Pray also for the church, that she would recover, in her own generation, the Reformation's clarity about the grace that alone saves.

Key Texts: *Romans 1:16–17; 3:21–28; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8–9; Romans 9:6–24; 2 Timothy 1:9; Canons of Dort (1619)*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before engaging this historical survey, how much of the church's doctrinal history have you previously encountered? Have you read any of the primary sources mentioned in this lesson, Augustine's Confessions, Luther's Preface to Romans, the Canons of Dort? What was your prior understanding of the Pelagian controversy and the Reformation debates over justification? How did that prior understanding shape your functional theology of salvation?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Romans 1:16–17. What two claims does Paul make about the gospel in verse 16? What does the phrase “the righteousness of God is revealed” in verse 17 mean in context, is this the righteousness by which God judges, or the righteousness by which He saves? How does Luther's rediscovery of the meaning of this phrase illuminate both the nature of his breakthrough and the magnitude of what the medieval tradition had obscured?
- Read Romans 3:21–28. In verse 28, Paul writes that “a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.” The New Perspective on Paul argues that “works of the Law” refers specifically to Jewish identity markers rather than to meritorious deeds. Examine the context: does Paul's argument in 3:9–20 suggest that “all” are guilty of an attempt to achieve standing before God by performance? What is the scope of Paul's argument in 3:21–28, is it primarily ecclesiological (about who belongs to the covenant community) or soteriological (about how a sinner stands before God)?
- Read Galatians 2:15–21. In verse 16, Paul uses the phrase “works of the Law” three times in close proximity to the word “justified.” What is the rhetorical and theological function of this repetition? What does Paul's statement in verse 21, “if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly”, reveal about the stakes of the justification debate? How does this verse function as a direct refutation of both Pelagian and Roman Catholic *soteriologies*?
- Read Ephesians 2:1–10. In verses 1–3, what three sources of the unregenerate person's bondage does Paul identify? How does the characterization of unbelievers as “by nature children of wrath” (v. 3) bear on the Pelagian claim that human beings are born morally neutral? In verses 8–9, does the phrase “not of yourselves” modify only “saved” or also “through faith”, and what are the soteriological implications of each reading?
- Read Romans 9:10–16. What specific argument does Paul make in verses 11–12 to establish the unconditional character of divine election? What does the phrase “not because of works but because of Him who calls” (v. 11) contribute to the debate between the Augustinian and Arminian positions? How does Paul's quotation of Exodus 33:19 in verse 15 ground the unconditioned freedom of divine election in the divine character itself?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson traces a recurring pattern in the history of Soteriology: synergism reasserts itself in every generation, in ever new forms. What specific features of fallen human nature make synergism so persistently attractive? Is the appeal of synergism primarily intellectual, moral, or spiritual? How does a

clear understanding of the nature of spiritual death (Ephesians 2:1) function as the most effective pastoral antidote to the synergistic instinct?

- The lesson describes Luther's breakthrough as a rediscovery of the meaning of "the righteousness of God" in Romans 1:17, the realization that this phrase refers to a righteousness that God gives rather than a righteousness by which God judges. Trace the exegetical argument for this reading from the context of Romans 1:17 itself and from the broader context of Romans 3:21–26. How does the grammatical and contextual evidence support the Reformation's reading against the medieval understanding?
- Calvin's doctrine of the duplex gratia, the inseparability of justification and sanctification as twin benefits of union with Christ, is described in the lesson as his distinctive contribution to Reformed soteriology. What specific theological dangers does this doctrine guard against? How does it prevent both antinomianism (the view that justification makes sanctification unnecessary) and legalism (the view that sanctification contributes to justification)? What biblical texts most directly support the duplex gratia framework?
- The New Perspective on Paul claims that the Reformation's reading of Paul was shaped by a misidentification of first-century Judaism with Pelagianism. The lesson contends that the Reformed response has been exegetically decisive. What are the strongest exegetical arguments against the NPP reading of Romans and Galatians? How does the universal scope of Paul's indictment in Romans 1:18–3:20 undermine the NPP's claim that Paul's argument is primarily about Jewish-Gentile relations?
- The lesson describes the Arminian Remonstrance as a form of Protestant synergism. What would a sophisticated Arminian theologian say in response to the characterization of his position as a "decisive reversal" of the Calvinist affirmations? And what is the Reformed reply to the Arminian objection that unconditional election and irresistible grace make God the author of sin? How does the distinction between the secret will and the revealed will of God (Deuteronomy 29:29) address the Arminian objection that irresistible grace renders the sincere gospel offer incoherent?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson argues that the history of Soteriology is a navigation tool for the contemporary church. Specifically, it claims that the default evangelical soteriology is functional Arminianism. Evaluate this claim in relation to your own theological community. What evidence do you see of Arminian assumptions in the preaching, evangelism, and worship of evangelical churches you are familiar with? What pastoral consequences have those assumptions produced?
- Augustine's Confessions present his pre-conversion life as a sustained flight from God, not a neutral searching that eventually found its way to the right answer, but an active rebellion that was arrested and redirected only by the sovereign intervention of divine grace. How does Augustine's account of his own conversion challenge the common evangelical narrative of conversion, in which the sinner "decides" for Christ as the culminating act of a process of personal inquiry?
- Luther's tower experience transformed not only his theology but his experience of God. He described it as feeling as though he had been born again and had entered through the open gates into paradise itself. Reflect on your own theological formation: has there been a moment in your study of Scripture or theology that functioned analogously, a moment when a doctrinal clarification produced not merely intellectual satisfaction but spiritual liberation? What would it mean for every student of this series to have that kind of encounter with the doctrine of justification by faith alone?
- The lesson concludes that Reformed soteriology is "the church's best and most faithful attempt to receive and transmit the apostolic testimony concerning the grace of God in the gospel." This is a strong claim. What

would falsify it? What kind of evidence, exegetical, historical, or pastoral, would in principle be sufficient to overturn the Reformed account? And what does the fact that the Augustinian and Reformed tradition has withstood twenty centuries of sustained challenge suggest about the robustness of its biblical foundations?

- How should the pastor or teacher use the history of Soteriology in the pulpit and classroom? Is it appropriate to name and critique specific contemporary soteriological errors (Arminianism, the prosperity gospel, the New Perspective on Paul) in the context of congregational preaching? What are the pastoral advantages and risks of doing so? How might the history surveyed in this lesson be used to commend the Reformation's account of the gospel not as a narrow denominational preference but as the recovery of what the apostles originally taught?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time with a slow reading of Romans 1:16–17, the text that Luther describes as the open gate through which he entered paradise. Read it not as a familiar passage to be recited but as the text whose rediscovery changed the course of Western history, and ask the Spirit to make it, in this moment, more than a historical curiosity. Ask Him to make it a personal declaration: that the gospel you have received is not a conditional offer awaiting your cooperation but the power of God for salvation, actual, effective, irreversible salvation, for everyone who believes. And then ask Him to give you, in fresh measure, the faith that receives it.

Pray with gratitude for the history of the church's doctrinal faithfulness. It would have been entirely possible, humanly speaking, for the Pelagian account of salvation to have prevailed in the fifth century and for the gospel of sovereign grace to have been definitively lost from the church's official teaching. It would have been entirely possible for the Reformation's recovery of justification by faith alone to have been suppressed or subsumed back into the medieval synthesis. That neither of these things happened is not a tribute to the intellectual superiority of Augustine or Luther or Calvin; it is the evidence of a sovereign providence that has preserved the apostolic testimony against every assault. Thank God for Augustine's Confessions. Thank God for Luther's tower. Thank God for the Synod of Dort. Thank God that He does not leave His church without witnesses to the truth that saves.

Pray with sobriety for the contemporary church. The errors this lesson has traced, Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, the medieval synergistic drift, Arminianism, the New Perspective, the Federal Vision, are not merely historical curiosities. They are the contemporary default of a church that has largely lost the soteriological clarity of the Reformation. Pray for pastors and teachers who do not yet know what they have lost, who preach a synergistic gospel not out of theological malice but out of theological ignorance, having been formed in a tradition that never taught them what was at stake. Pray that the Spirit would use the recovery of soteriological clarity in one generation to make it available to the next, and that the church's preachers would be equipped not merely with eloquence and sincerity but with the doctrinal precision that the high pastoral calling of gospel proclamation demands.

Pray for the lost with a theology shaped by what this lesson has taught. The person who does not yet believe is not merely someone who has not yet made the right decision; she is someone who, apart from the sovereign regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, is incapable of making it. Pray for her with the theological realism that this understanding demands, knowing that only God can open eyes that are blind, only God can soften hearts that are hardened, and only God can raise souls that are spiritually dead. And pray with the confidence that the same sovereignty that grounds those diagnoses is the sovereignty that can, in a moment, transform the most hardened of sinners into the most grateful of worshippers. The history of the church is full of Augustine-like stories, and those stories are not flukes of human decision but trophies of sovereign grace.

Close with a reading of Romans 9:15–16: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy" (NASB 1995). Sit with the weight of these words as a congregation of people who are standing on the right side of the divine mercy not because of anything they willed or ran toward, but because of the God who had mercy. Let the theology produce the only response it is designed to produce: not pride, not passivity, but the prostrate and astonished gratitude of creatures who deserved nothing and received everything. This is the note on which every lesson of this history ends. And it is the note on which the whole of eternity will begin.

“So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.”

Romans 9:16, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Romans 1:16–17; 3:21–28; 9:6–24; Galatians 2:15–21; Ephesians 2:1–10; 2 Timothy 1:9; Canons of Dort (1619)

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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