How Did We Get Here?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History

LESSON 4

Grace, Free Will, and Predestination

Does grace enable faith—or ensure faith?



What Does Scripture Teach?

Begin with Jesus, then Paul

John 6:44	No one comes unless the Father draws him.
John 5:40	Jesus holds people accountable for refusing to come.
Ephesians 2:8–9	Salvation is by grace through faith, not from ourselves.

Augustine and Pelagius

Can fallen humanity turn to God unaided?

The dispute	Is grace necessary for the very beginning of faith?
Pelagius (c. 354–after 418)	God commands obedience; human freedom remains able to respond.
Augustine (354–430)	Original sin bends the will; saving grace must act first.

The Council of Orange (529)

Grace must precede even the first movement of faith

Limit	Orange did not endorse every later Calvinist claim.
Affirmed	The beginning of faith itself is a gift of grace.
Rejected	The idea that humans first turn to God unaided.

Martin Luther (1483–1546)

The Bondage of the Will (1525)

Human will	Real choices remain, but the fallen will cannot produce saving faith.
Divine grace	God rescues the will; salvation does not begin with human initiative.
Later Lutheran distinction	Saving grace can be resisted; predestination to damnation is rejected.

John Calvin (1509–1564)

Effectual calling and God’s sovereign election

Sin and freedom	People willingly choose, but cannot turn to Christ unaided.
Regeneration	The Spirit changes the heart; saving faith follows.
Effectual grace	God’s inward call to the elect ultimately brings faith.

Election and Reprobation

Does Scripture teach both Dual Predetination?

Point of dispute	Individual eternal destiny, or salvation history and covenant peoples?
Romans 9:10–18	Jacob and Esau; mercy depends upon God.
Romans 9:19–23	The potter and vessels of mercy and wrath.

Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609)

Grace enables faith without guaranteeing the response

Agreed with Calvin	No fallen sinner initiates saving faith without grace.
Prevenient grace	God’s grace enables repentance and faith.
Resistible grace	The person may respond in faith or reject God’s call.

The Synod of Dort (1618–1619)

A Reformed answer to the Remonstrants

Remonstrance (1610)	Arminius’s followers articulated conditional election and resistible grace.
Dort	Reformed delegates rejected the Remonstrant articles.
Historical consequence	The five Reformed responses later became associated with TULIP.

Calvinism and Arminianism

What does grace actually accomplish?

Both	God acts first. No one earns salvation.
Calvinist	Saving grace effectively brings the elect to faith.
Arminian	Prevenient grace makes faith possible but can be resisted.

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)

Freedom of the Will (1754)

Natural ability	A person has faculties to understand and choose.
Moral inability	Sinful desires mean the person will not choose God unaided.
Responsibility	A voluntary choice remains accountable, even when desires govern it.

J. I. Packer (1926–2020)

Antinomy: two biblical truths in tension

Divine sovereignty	God accomplishes His saving purpose.
Human responsibility	People are commanded to believe and are accountable.
Packer’s emphasis	Affirm both scriptural truths without pretending to resolve every tension.

Where Christians Stand Today

Distinct approaches to grace and freedom

Reformed / Calvinist	Piper · Sproul · Packer · Mohler · Schreiner
Arminian / Wesleyan	Olson · Walls · Witherington · Picirilli
Other perspectives	Lutheran · Catholic · Flowers (Provisionism)

God’s Desire and God’s Decree

Three categories of biblical testimony

God’s expressed desire	1 Timothy 2:4 · Ezekiel 18:23 · 2 Peter 3:9
God’s sovereign purpose	Ephesians 1:11 · Isaiah 46:10
Where they intersect	Acts 2:23 · Acts 4:27–28: God’s plan and human guilt

What Does Scripture Clearly Teach?

Hold together the full biblical witness

Human need	No one saves himself or herself by unaided merit. (Eph. 2:1–9)
God’s initiative	The Father draws; the Spirit gives life. (John 6:44; 3:5–8)
Gospel command	Repent and believe. (Mark 1:15)
Accountability	Human rejection is real and culpable. (John 5:40)

What Scripture Leaves Us Debating

Where faithful Christians interpret differently

Grace	Does it enable saving faith or ensure it?
Election	Is it unconditional individual election or understood differently?
God’s will	How do His saving desire, sovereign decree, and responsibility fit?

What Must I Do to Be Saved?

Return to Acts 16:30–31

The question	“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”
The biblical answer	“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household.”
Our task	Let Scripture govern the theological explanations we construct.