

A Battle of the Wills

Selected Scriptures

17 January 2021 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: Why do some people reject God's grace when they hear the gospel?

Big Idea: We can't resist the Holy Spirit's call to salvation.

This talk was preached as part of a series on TULIP preached in the Grace Bible Church Network. This manuscript is faithful to what was originally preached, but the talk underwent significant revision when preached at other churches for the sake of clarity, balance and graciousness.

Introduction

Jemimah grew up in a regular Aussie family.

When she went to university, she met Sarah in one of her tute groups.

Over the years, as they had classes together and worked on group projects, they began to get to know each other.

One day, after Jemimah's boyfriend unceremoniously dumped her, they found themselves talking about the deeper things of life.

She knew that Sarah was a Christian, but she was a little bit surprised when she was invited to read the Bible with her.

Deciding that she didn't really have anything to lose, she agreed.

At first, it was just idle curiosity, but as the weeks went on, she found herself looking forward to their weekly meetings.

It was a surprise to herself, let alone anyone else, that she found herself being drawn in by what she was reading.

Until one day, it suddenly hit her like a fully loaded semi-trailer.

If all sin and fall short of the glory of God, then SHE was a sinner who needed forgiveness to be right with God.

Only by trusting in Jesus dying on cross could she be saved from her rebellion.

As they sat in the café that day, God's grace broke through and Jemimah became a Christian.

She knew she was different now and she was amazed by how liberated she felt.

Full of excitement at what she'd just discovered, that night she couldn't help telling her family what she'd just discovered.

Her family didn't really do religion, but her parents had always told her that she was free to believe whatever she wanted.

Their reaction was so unexpected that it caused her to stop in her tracks.

Instead of being excited about hearing the great news, they were almost completely indifferent.

Her mother muttered something about being pleased for her and then quickly changed the subject.

Jemimah wondered how it was that they weren't excited about this great news?

She'd just shared the most amazing thing with them and they didn't really care.

Maybe Jemimah's story is a little bit like yours or you might know someone who's had the same kind of experience.

It raises the question, doesn't it, "Why do some people hear the gospel and respond while others don't?"

Why are some people cut to the heart the first time they hear it while others hear the truth time after time and it seems to make no difference?

Those are the kinds of questions that we're going to be thinking about this morning.

Series Outline

This week, we're starting a new series that'll run for the next five weeks.

We're calling it *TULIP: To the Praise of His Glorious Grace*.

Each week, we'll look at one of five truths about how we're saved.

These truths all relate to each other and depend on each other.

They're often described by the acrostic T.U.L.I.P.

T – Total depravity

U – Unconditional election,

L – Limited atonement,

I – Irresistible grace,

P – Perseverance of the saints

They're sometimes known as the Five Points of Calvinism or the Doctrines of Grace.

If you've been kicking around churches for a while, you might've heard of this.

Usually in either a really good way or a really bad way!

Even though it uses his name, John Calvin didn't come up with the idea of TULIP.

For a start, Calvin spoke French.

He also died about four hundred years before the mnemonic TULIP became popular in the 1960s.

Even though Calvin didn't write them and they aren't that old, I believe that TULIP's a pretty good summary of what the Bible teaches.

Although just about every sermon you listen to will want to change the exact wording, it's become so widely known and if you change them they don't fit into a nice neat word anymore, so we're stuck with it.

Even still, you might be wondering, "Why TULIP?"

It kind of seems a little bit random, doesn't it?

When you think of the Netherlands, a few things might pop into your head.

Two really iconic Dutch things are windmills and tulips.

TULIP's a nod to a controversy that happened in Holland in the early 1600s.

John Calvin is probably one of the most famous Reformers, especially because he wrote a really significant book called the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

About forty years after he died, one of his spiritual grandchildren – a bloke named Jacobus Arminius – died.

Arminius' followers submitted five disagreements with what the church was teaching (not just what John Calvin taught) about how we're saved.

This's a little bit confusing because Arminius' followers put up five ideas, but they don't match up exactly with the five points of TULIP.

The Synod of Dort rejected these ideas, but they lived on in a group of people called Arminians.

Don't confuse them with Armenians.

They're a people group from Western Asia who – confusingly for us – are typically Christians.

There is a country named Armenia that was part of the Soviet states – next to Georgia, Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan, but these people are now scattered around the world.

Arminianism can be described with the acronym DOGOD.¹

This table compares the two:

Total Depravity People will never desire God unless God first changes their heart	Deprived Ability People can desire God because God freed their will
Unconditional Election God chooses because He chooses	Open Election God chooses because we choose

Limited Atonement Christ died as payment for the sins of His people	General Atonement Christ died to offer payment for the sins of everyone
Irresistible Grace The Spirit's love overcomes our resistance to Him	Opposable Grace The Spirit's love can be resisted by us
Perseverance of the Saints Salvation can't be lost because of God	Danger of Apostasy Salvation can be lost because of us

That probably feels like it's overwhelming because there's a lot of information on there.

That's why we're going to spend the next few weeks unpacking these ideas.

You probably know that this discussion amongst Christians can get pretty heated.

Calvinists accuse Arminians of distorting the gospel.

Arminians accuse Calvinists of abusing God's character.

One Arminian I read said, "the Calvinist makes God a lying, deceiving, bigoted, malicious, unjust, confused hypocrite who is responsible for the world's evil and who creates people for the expressed purpose of torturing them forever."²

We have both Calvinists and Arminians in our church, so I want to be really clear that you can be either and not only saved, but part of our church.

John Wesley and George Whitfield are two famous Christians – both great men of God – who disagreed strongly over this and yet still cared for each other.

But at the end of the day they can't both be right.

One or the other must be inconsistent with what the Bible teaches.

We think that Calvinism – expressed in the acronym T.U.L.I.P. – best represents how we are saved.

This will be an opportunity to think deeply about these things over the next couple of weeks and see how you understand them in light of Scripture.

I know that this all this talk of doctrine and history and division might make you start to yawn or perhaps even run away.

Doctrine, schmocktrine. Why should I care about this?

All of the theologians can debate about it as much as they like, but what difference does it make?

If that's your question, I'm glad you asked.

This gets to the heart of what God's like – his character.

And this really takes us to some of those really big questions that we like to ask.

You know, the kind of big questions that you only dare to ask late at night while sitting around the campfire.

Questions of heaven and hell, meaning and purpose.

My prayer for this series is that it wouldn't just stir up controversy for controversy's sake.

I hope that we would have a deeper experience of God's grace because of it.

That we would grow as a church that gives God even more praise for the grace that he's shown towards us.

Outline

This morning, we're going to start our tiptoe through the tulips by talking about "I" – not Ben Shannon but irresistible grace.

The big question is, "Why do some people reject God's grace when they hear the gospel?"

Or to make it a bit more personal – "If God calls, will you answer?"

The big idea is that **we can't resist the Holy Spirit's call to salvation.**

There will be three points:

- Amazing Grace
- Rejecting Grace
- Accepting Grace

Amazing Grace

This morning we're talking about irresistible grace.

We can't talk about grace without understanding how amazing it is!

Grace is the word we use to describe God's kindness and favour to us.

God's grace in salvation is to allow sinners to be saved from sin.

The Bible's very clear that every single human being is a sinner:

Romans 3:10–11 NIV11 ¹⁰ As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one;
¹¹ there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.

It's quite common for people to think of sins as being individual things that people do wrong.

It's much deeper than that though.

Sin is an outright rejection of God and his rule over us.

That rejection causes us to rebel against him.

A just and holy God can't allow the destruction caused by our sin to go unpunished.

So, the consequence of our rebellion is death.

Our sin leads to death and that's not a good predicament to be in.

Romans 6:23 says:

Romans 6:23a NIV11 ²³ For the wages of sin is death,

But the Good News is that God has intervened in history and in our lives.

While we were still sinners, God sent his son Jesus to die for us.

Romans 5:8 NIV11 ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

This was an act of mercy.

Mercy is being let off from receiving the punishment you deserve.

At the cross, Jesus took the punishment that we deserve on himself.

He died so that sinners can be forgiven.

Grace goes one step further.

Grace not only allows us to escape the punishment we deserve, it gives us something good instead.

Jesus has freed us for eternal life.

Even when we were spiritually dead because of our sin, God made us alive with Christ.

Ephesians 2:5 NIV11 ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

Jesus died on the cross so that our sins could be forgiven and we can live.

Grace – by its very definition – is completely undeserved.

Paul goes on in Ephesians 2 to tell us that that opposite of grace is works.

There's nothing that we can do to gain salvation.

There's absolutely nothing you can do to earn it or buy it

It's far more valuable than gold and yet it's completely free.

Salvation is a gift.

It's a gift that can only be received.

Don't think in terms of it being fair.

Grace is totally unfair.

We escape the punishment we deserve and instead received the blessing that we don't deserve.

That's why grace is simply so amazing!

Rejecting Grace

God's grace is so amazing, and so you might wonder, "Why would anyone reject it?"

I saw this piece of advertising from McDonald's during the week.

I thought it was completely resistible!

I'm not one bit interested in that deal at all, even though the marketing department tells me otherwise.

It can look like Calvinists are just as confused when we talk about irresistible grace.

The idea that God's grace is irresistible doesn't seem to match up with our experience.

We might think that the gospel of grace is amazing, but our experience is that there are lots of people who reject it.

Everyone in this room has heard the gospel, but probably not everyone has accepted it.

This's really important to get.

Irresistible grace DOES NOT mean that when we proclaim the gospel – whether it's from the pulpit, sharing a tract or reading the Bible over a coffee (and maybe two hash browns) with a friend – that everyone who hears or read will be saved.

It's impossible to get away from, even in the Bible.

For instance, when Stephen preaches the gospel in Acts 7, they pick up stone and put him to death.

That's quite a radical rejection of the gospel.

Both Calvinists and Arminians believe that when the gospel is proclaimed – what's sometimes called the 'external call' of the gospel – that people will reject it.

What we'd disagree on is WHY that's the case.

Arminianism teaches that some sinners refuse God's offer of pardon, mercy and salvation because of our free will.

You've probably heard of the concept of free will.

It's the idea that we get to choose whatever we want.

Human beings make real choices that have real consequences.

We weren't created to be pre-programmed robots with every decision made for us.

When it comes to salvation, this is used to explain that we're free to reject salvation.

The gospel is proclaimed, and you and I are free to say "no" to it.

God hasn't created us to be robots and so I am in charge of whether I reject God's grace or not.

I am free to resist God's grace.

I can understand that.

Nowhere in the Bible are we given the idea that we're programmed.

Calvinists are often accused of saying that God has determined everything in the past and so we don't have any choice.

That's not true.

As a Calvinist, I'd say that the problem's the will part.

In his famous book *Freedom of the Will*, Jonathan Edwards describes our will as "that by which the mind chooses."

We choose what we desire.

God has made us as people who think and so we won't just choose anything because we make reasoned choices.

We don't make decisions randomly or by rolling a die because we know that's not a good way of making decisions.

We make choices for a reason.

Arminians teach that when we make a choice, it could go either way.

Calvinists on the other hand, would say that people are blind.

We reject the proclamation of the gospel because our wills are bound.

And so left to our own devices, we'll resist the gospel every single time it's proclaimed.

It's a common view that we're mostly good, but that there's a little bit of us that's bad.

That's not how the Bible talks about us:

Jeremiah 17:9 NIV11 ⁹The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

Ever since sin entered the world, our wills have been bound.

We are dead in our sin and simply unable to see the light of the gospel.

We reject the proclamation of the gospel we're blind.

In 2 Corinthians 4, we're told that unbelievers can't see the light of the gospel.

2 Corinthians 4:4 NIV11 ⁴The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

We're not programmed or determined.

We're free to make whatever choice we'd like.

So we're free to follow our desires and sin in all kinds of ways!

That means that we'll pick rejecting the gospel every, single time.

We'll keep rejecting the gospel until our will is changed so that we stop rejecting the gospel.

One way that this matters is that it changes the way we think about sharing the gospel with people.

When we share the gospel, we try to persuade people, just like Paul did in Acts 19, where he spent three months "arguing persuasively" in the synagogue in Ephesus.

Calvinists are often accused of not sharing the gospel, after all, if God will save people they'll be saved, right?

Wrong.

Gospel proclamation is the means that God often uses to change people's hearts.

It's not the only way he can do it, but there's no getting out of it because it's what he's commanded us to do.

We don't know how he'll use our efforts.

Other people's salvation doesn't ultimately depend on our efforts though.

Arguments aren't enough.

When we preach the gospel and nothing happens, we can get really disappointed.

We know that this news is dynamite.

Why aren't people being changed when they hear it?

So we start to wonder, perhaps it's us.

Maybe there's something that we need to change?

Perhaps the message is too embarrassing?

What if we just tweak a few things?

The temptation when people don't respond to our arguments is to try and change the gospel.

Or – so that we don't change the gospel – we'll just emphasise God's love and back-peddle on his justice.

We can't do that.

At the same time, don't assume that our methods are okay.

If we're not spending time with people who aren't Christians or we're being obnoxious to them, then we really do need to change what we've been preaching.

We should expect people to reject our gospel proclamation because their hearts are veiled.

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul explains why he doesn't lose heart in ministry.

He won't change the gospel and will keep preaching Christ crucified.

He will depend on God to shine light into our hearts.

2 Corinthians 4:6 NIV11 ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

This means that the Calvinist will work hard, but sleep easy knowing that God must also be at work.

People will reject the gospel.

Accepting the Gospel

It's not all bad news though, because there are people who really do accept the gospel.

How do we accept the gospel call.

I'll show my hand: it's because when the Holy Spirit chooses to save us, people can't resist.

Many – but not all – Arminians would agree that we're totally depraved.

Some think that we're just sick or impaired, not really dead in our sins as Ephesians 2:1-3 says.

We'll be talking about that in more detail another week.

Total depravity doesn't mean that we're as bad as we could be.

It means that every part of us resists God.

Even the good things we do are for the wrong motives – for our own glory rather than from obedience to God.

If we're totally depraved, God can and must save us by his grace.

We'd agree that we need God's grace to be saved and that God the father has to draw us and work in us by the Holy Spirit.

But there are two very different views about grace functions to bring people in darkness into light.

Arminianism teaches that there is a kind of grace called "prevenient grace."

I don't know about you, but "prevenient" isn't the kind of word that I use every day.

It means to come before or precede.

Prevenient grace is grace that comes BEFORE regeneration.

This's an absolutely key idea because there's a lot that hangs on it.

You can't actually find the word in the Bible, but then you can't find the word Trinity either.

Prevenient grace means that God graciously restores all men with sufficient ability to make a choice in the matter of submission to Him.

Basically, God uses all kinds of ways – and different people think about this differently – to attract our attention.

His grace stimulates or excites us just enough for us to have free will, but doesn't renovate the will.

This makes it an even playing field for us to choose how we'll respond to God.

God's saving grace can then be rejected or accepted.

Through prevenient grace, God enlightens all men.

John 1:9 is often used to make the case:

John 1:9 NIV11 ⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

In John though, light exposes the moral state of our heart.

It's not used to describe enlightening all people so that that they can be saved.

This makes salvation SYNERGIC.

In other words, it's God and I working together.

Sometimes, you hear Calvinists argue that this undermines grace.

It's no longer a free gift because you've added in works.

An Arminians would say, "Not at all!

"Your acceptance of God's gift doesn't CONTRIBUTE to your salvation – that's all of God.

"God offers the gift, you simply have to decide whether to accept it or not."

I want to be generous, but I struggle with that because then I've read Arminians who talk about "making an attempt to believe in Jesus Christ".³

You've now added works in when your attempt to believe is what gets you in.

Titus 3:5 tells us the reason that we've been saved isn't because of the great things we've done, it's because of God's mercy.

It's through his washing – no mention of our trying to believe first.

Titus 3:5 NIV11 ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,

One of the reasons that Arminians believe this is because they rightly want to emphasise the love of God.

If we have the choice though, if God can be resisted, then God's desire can ultimately be thwarted by our own decisions.

It diminishes his sovereignty.

And that makes God less than the God who can't be thwarted

Daniel 4:35 NIV11 ³⁵ All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"

John tells us that God saves not because of the will of man.

He saves on the basis of himself.

John 1:12–13 NIV11 ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Holy Spirit, when he calls us to salvation, changes our desires.

When someone is saved, it happens through the work of the Spirit.

We've got the example of Lydia in Acts 16.

Lydia was a very wealthy woman from the city of Thyatira, home of purple dye.

He sold her cloth in haberdashery stores around the empire.

One day, Paul comes to town and on the Sabbath he goes down to a place near the river, near the city gate and he begins talking to the women there.

God opens her heart so that she can believe.

Note that God didn't do this in some general way so that she understood.

She was specifically opened and in that moment she answered the call of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 16:14 NIV11 ¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

Her heart wasn't already opened, it needed to be opened for her to believe.

God doesn't just act first, he acts decisively in salvation.

God changes our wills.

Paul writes in Philippians that God does more than enlighten us, he changes our wills.

Philippians 2:13 NIV11 ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

Some people will object that means that this happens against our will.

And that's kind of true, isn't it?

It IS against the will of the old man.

But not against the will of the new man.

No one is brought kicking and screaming into the kingdom of God.

Regeneration isn't a violation of your will.

It's something much better and much more powerful – God changes our will.

God changes our desires so that we want to come in.

So that his grace becomes simply irresistible to us.

The devil can't stop him, the world can't stop him, even people themselves can't stop him.

We can't do anything to stand in God's way and prevent salvation.

This doesn't happen every time the gospel is proclaimed, but when the Spirit is at work, changing our desires, then it'll be irresistible.

When God calls us INTERNALLY, we're powerless to resist.

When God choose to save someone, they are saved

The reason we accept the gospel isn't that we're more important or smarter or wiser than anyone else.

Our reasoning isn't better.

When God has called us, there's no reason to boast.

Nor is it because the explanation was somehow better in this situation.

That's what the Arminian HAS to say.

If that's the case, why doesn't God have the gospel explained in a helpful and persuasive way all the time?

If God desires every single individual to be saved and yet still allows us to make the final choice, why isn't he more successful?

Is he unable? Or not powerful enough?

That would be an absurdly audacious claim.

If people need God to be at work to save us, then we should be the biggest prayer warriors.

Asking, pleading with God that he would be at work.

I've got to say that I'm not massively into new year's resolutions.

But one of my goals for how I want to grow this year is to pray for the lost.

God delights in us asking him to be at work in our lives and the lives of others.

And my burden is that I just don't pray enough for those who don't know Jesus.

I get that sounds like a really noble aim.

We're just a few weeks into the new year and it's hard.

Will you join me?

Belief is the result of God irresistibly showing his grace.

Conclusion

The doctrine of irresistible grace should give us great hope.

I want to finish up by tell you about a bloke named Dave.

He called himself a Christian but he was doing his best to run away from God.

He didn't really care about the things of God and was happy to put himself above God.

In his own word, he "just didn't like God."

He joined the army and embraced the culture and became a drinker, a fighter and a womanizer

He was a big bloke with a tough reputation for being involved in casual violence.

“Having the ability to punch someone out – I loved that. Most men will know the adrenalin that comes in the middle of a fight when things really get dangerous. It’s addictive – you love it.”

He enjoyed it and was proud of it.

Even if you’re the kind of person who tries to steer clear of blokes like Dave, you’ve probably come across someone like him before.

Perhaps you’ve even wondered, like I have, how could God’s grace could ever cut through to someone like that?

Someone who just seems like they’re too far gone and certainly not interested in the things of God.

Too rough, too tough to be saved.

I’ve felt like sharing the gospel with someone like that would result in being king hit rather than a repentant heart.

One day, Dave work up with a hangover like he’d done so many times before.

So he opened up his laptop to try and make himself feel better by watching some porn.

His sister had given him the laptop and he saw some sermons that his sister had watched.

That morning, instead of watching porn, he watched four or five hours of sermons including John Piper’s *Don’t Waste Your Life*.

God broke through and convicted him of his sin.

“Above all else I had been acting in a way that I felt was horrendous and horrific towards God whom I’d always believed in.

“And the second thing I was struck with was the overwhelming sense that I was actually wasting my life,

“Not only was my life a waste but I was going to go to hell.

“I realised that no matter what I had done, no matter how far I had walked, no matter how much I’d rejected God, the cross of Christ was for me. He’d done it for me and the love of God shining through Jesus was more powerful than anything I’d done.”

Dave wasn’t particularly seeking God out and yet God reached out to him.

It wasn’t that he sat there that morning and was suddenly convinced – when he hadn’t ever before – that he was doing the wrong thing.

That wasn't the first time that he'd been told that he was wasting his life.

The difference was that God removed the veil.

Dave's story should also be particular encouragement to parents.

It's not like that was the first time he'd heard the gospel.

He grew up hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ – the external call of the gospel – faithfully shared over and over and over again.

He had a mother who prayed for him.

His father and his uncle would be amongst some of the most well-known pastors in Australia.

It didn't take the right family, though, it took the irresistible grace of God

We don't know who God's chosen for salvation.

God will work in some people's lives early and in other people's lives at the very last moment.

God's call to salvation doesn't necessarily happen in the timeframe that we'd want or expect.

But when God works, resistance is useless.

When he opens our eyes to see the beauty and glory of his grace, it's simply irresistible.

¹ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 528.

² '1. Calvinism's Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace', David Servant, accessed 16 January 2021, <https://www.davidservant.com/articles/calvinism/calvinism-total-depravity-and-irresistible-grace/>.

³ 'What Is Calvinism?', David Servant, 8 November 2017, <https://www.davidservant.com/what-is-calvinism/>.

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Big Question: Why do some people reject God's grace when they hear the gospel?

Big Idea: We can't resist the Holy Spirit's call to salvation.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe some practical situations that the doctrine of Irresistible Grace speaks to.
2. What does it mean to be saved by grace?
3. Does the doctrine of irresistible grace mean that God's grace can't be resisted?
4. What are some reasons that God's grace can be resisted?
5. How does the reality that the Holy Spirit will be rejected shape the way we share the gospel?
6. How does God overcome our rejection of him?
7. Does God force anyone to be saved?
8. Why would a Calvinist pray for their friends?