

Transcript 192

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Today, we're going to be in part five of our what is Calvinism discussion. Interesting this is point 4. Today we'll be discussing what is the doctrine of irresistible grace. So the first episode is more like an introduction to Calvinism in general. They're going to discuss the five points of Calvinism, and then we're going to have a concluding episode. Kind of like what are the practical implications of Calvinism. So just letting me know where we're at in the series. So if you haven't listened to the previous episodes, I'd encourage you to do so because they all the points kind of build on each other and even our discussion about our levels of just agreement and disagreement and all that. Be very helpful if you watched the previous episode. So joining me as usual is Kevin, the managing editor of gotquestions.org and Jeff, the managing editor of bibleref.com. So Kevin, Jeff, thanks for joining us today.

Shea Houdmann

I think let me start off with two very common misconceptions about irresistible grace before we jump into what it actually is. The first, most people hear the doctrine of irresistible grace, they picture it the Calvinist view, salvation is God always dragging someone like kicking and screaming to salvation. That it's a matter of God forcing themselves over our wills to accept something that we actually didn't want. And for most people, that's not their experience the salvation at all. So when they get that in their minds, well, of course irresistible grace isn't biblical because that's not how I came to faith in Christ. So well, that's not what Calvinism actually teaches. If you want a biblical example, you could point to like maybe the apostle Paul in the book of Acts where he was fighting God with every fiber of his being until God opened his

eyes, ironically by blinding him. So God is perfectly capable of dragging someone against the will, but that's not actually what the doctrine of irresistible grace teaches.

Shea Houdmann

Second misconception is that God's grace can't be resisted, as if the very first time God calls us or draws us, or opens our eyes or softens our heart, we're going to believe at that very instant. No, plenty of people have resisted God's call to salvation for years, for decades before finally submitting themselves to Christ and trusting in him by faith. So irresistible grace does not mean that God's grace can't be resisted. So Jeff, with that quick intro, what actually is the Calvinistic doctrine of irresistible grace?

Jeff Laird

Well, you know me and I know I like definitions. I like making sure that things are accurate and that they're on point. And I think it's good that we start there because I'm one of those people who thinks that a lot of the controversy over this particular point, and I would say in my experience, irresistible grace is by far the most contentious of the points of Calvinism. It's usually contentious because it is taken very literally according to the words irresistible grace. And we can go off on tangents on that. But the way that it's typically presented, the way it's understood, is the suggestion that the Holy Spirit is always going to work in the lives of those who are unconditionally elected so that they infallibly will come to faith in Christ. That also means that this is God overcoming whatever resistance, whatever objection, whatever personality, environmental factors, and so on and so forth. It simply means that a sovereign God is going to get through to the people whom he chooses to get through to, and then when he decides to do that, there is nothing a person can do, or could do in order to stop that from happening. That's the sort of the theoretical version of it. And I know as we go through today, we'll probably bring up some of the the different ways that we can take that. You've already alluded to a couple of them, you know, misunderstandings of what we mean by irresistible, and what we mean by grace. In that sense that, that which God wants to see accomplished in terms

of salvation is absolutely going to happen, is very biblical. And when we actually get into Scripture, we'll see a lot of stuff in the Bible that supports those things.

Kevin Stone

Yeah. And some of the scriptural support that we see in the Bible from for this whole matter of irresistible grace or the effectual calling as it's sometimes called, would include passages like James 1:18. It says that God chose to give us birth through the word of truth. And so we we kind of see unconditional election in this passage as well. But here it's specifically referring to the birthing process, the the new birth happens because of God's choice that he causes us to be born again through the word of truth. John Chapter 6 is a passage that is often used in support of irresistible grace, or the effectual calling. And Jesus here says that all those the father gives me will come to me. And whoever comes to me, I will never drive away. He says in the next verse I've come to do the father's will. And then verse 39, he says, and this is the will of him who sent me that I shall lose none of those of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day for my father's will is that everyone who looks to the son and believes in him shall have eternal life. I will raise them up the last day.

Kevin Stone

So here the the key phrases here that the father gives certain people to the son, the Good Shepherd and that he will lose none of them. Everyone that the father gives is going to come to me Jesus says they're in verse 37. Also, I'll share a couple more here. Second Corinthians chapter 4, the first part of this chapter, and verse 3. Paul says that if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, because the 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. Verse 6 Paul uses this illustration, for God who said let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. So in this passage Paul says that some are blinded to the gospel, but then God has given the light of salvation to others, those that he chooses to give

light to. So back in Genesis God says let there be light. And there was light. And so in the darkened, blinded heart of of the natural man, God can say, let there be light in the heart, and there's going to be the the results going to be just as sure. There will be light. God is going to open those eyes, God is going to unblind those that right now cannot see the gospel. And this is all according to God's will and based on God's overcoming power to overcome all resistance.

Kevin Stone

And then I'll just mention Romans 8 and verse 30 as well. There are other passages, but Romans 8:30, those he predestined he also called. Those he called He also justified. Those he justified He also glorified. So we have this step by step process going from predestination to glorification. And so we asked the question, is there anybody on the first step where God predestines them, step one, who does not make it all the way to glorification, which is the final step? The answer seems to be no. I mean, the the whole process is done according to the will of God and those he predestines are also glorified. And so this and the calling that word calling is actually mentioned right here as part of the process.

Shea Houdmann

It's interesting in that that that, that passage, the golden chain of salvation, I think we just recently published an article on that and how they're all linked together. And if some people who reject Calvinism either fully or partially will say, well, there are multiple callings of God. It's like, well, that's that's debatable whether there's a a general call and a specific call. But in the call in Romans 8, that particular call results in glorification 100% of the time. So at some point there is an effectual calling that when God issues that call, people come, they are saved, they are justified, and they will ultimately be glorified. And that's some it's it's a powerful reminder that, yeah, you can talk about God being various levels of grace, different callings to different people at different times. But ultimately there is a call that is 100% effectual according to Romans 8.

Kevin Stone

Yes, Calvinists would split the calling into two different types, the external call or the or the general call that all mankind receives. So a man walks outside and he sees thee, sees all of God's creation, and he can say, well, I know that there's a God. I can respond to this, this creation that God has made. The heavens declare the glory of God. But then there's also the the general call of of the Gospel when it's preached. Every time somebody hears the gospel, that is a general call to salvation. But then the Calvinist would say there is a there's a, there's another call, an internal call that doesn't fall just on on people's ears, but it's the Holy Spirit speaking to the heart, and that internal call is the effectual one. So somebody can resist the external calls to salvation. They can, they can say no to the Gospel when they hear it physically, but when the Holy Spirit is working with God's power inside the heart, that is the effectual call that that Calvinist would say is irresistible.

Shea Houdmann

So so Jeff, you mentioned earlier that you find this point to be the most controversial of the five points of Calvinism, and that I think you said that last week as well. And that surprises me in that most people would put like limited atonement as the most controversial or some people even say the fifth one the eternal security or perseverance of Saints is most controversial. Or why why for you and your experience is irresistible grace, the most controversial of the five points?

Jeff Laird

I think the reason that it's the most controversial is because it it is the one point that is the most directly tied to the sense of God's sovereignty. And I think that's where for me it gets complicated when it when we start talking about whether or not it's valid or invalid, whether it makes sense or whether it doesn't make sense. Really when you look at Calvinism, the whole Tulip thing comes down to how you put the the you and the I together, unconditional election and irresistible grace. What exactly do you mean by those and how do they work? The others are almost they're not irrelevant, but they're they're relatively easy to pass off and say they sort

of stand alone, they kind of mix in. But irresistible grace gets into this idea of how much free will human beings actually have, and how responsible we are for the things that we say and that we do. And there is definitely push back philosophically, even spiritually, biblically on some of the approaches to irresistible grace.

Jeff Laird

So for example, as Kevin was talking about something like a general call in an effectual call. Sometimes when you look at that, you start asking questions like, but then is the general call a sincere offer? In other words, if it's something that's being offered by a God who knows full well that you're not even capable of responding to it in the 1st place, then does that represent some kind of insincerity? Now if somebody says no, it doesn't represent insincerity because the person is willfully resisting God. Then you get to the whole issue of but then irresistible grace. If God is capable of making an offer that we cannot refuse, we are incapable of refusing, then why wouldn't he? Why would he tell us things like you have to repent. You need to believe. Why would he say those types of things? So it brings up questions that are difficult for us to answer.

Jeff Laird

And we've said before with a lot of these points that we are trying to look behind the curtain. You know, we're looking under the hood of the machine here. We're trying to understand God's will, and there's always going to be some sense where we're going to come to a point and say I can't fully understand this. For me, I find that irresistible grace is the point where we most often see people who want to pull problems with that, but they want to ground those in the real world. In other words, there's a difference between legitimately saying I don't know how God does this or what it means, that's a mystery. Versus saying this thing seems like a logical contradiction. And those are two different things. And you're going to run into more of those with irresistible grace than you will with others just because the way that it interacts with free will, sin, a lot of different things. There's so many different ways that that interacts that you're going to have problems eventually.

Shea Houdmann

Jeff well said. I mean, just really nailing down the implications of this and that the once the Calvinism build on each other, but by the time you get to irresistible grace, you're really at a point is like, wow, yes, I see in a sense the consistency between the points, but this is where I guess it gets real, so to speak, in that, ok, if all this is true, this has some pretty major implications for how the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of human work together. So. But with that in mind and Kevin, I know you have some scriptures that you think tend to present a different perspective than what the Calvinistic doctrine of irresistible grace teaches. So what are some of those?

Kevin Stone

Yeah, sure. We know that. We know that people change, right, and that that God has the ability to change people. We think of King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel Chapter 4. I mean, what a proud and powerful king, he's the king that put up his own image and made people bow down to that. That guy's like, he's far gone. He's never going to get, he's never going to honor God is he? But then he does. And Daniel four, God has had a way of bringing him to his knees. And he actually praises God, the God of Daniel there in Daniel Chapter 4. It's an amazing change in King Nebuchadnezzar's heart. And Shea, you mentioned the apostle Paul and how he was turned around and in in his life. And so we know that God transforms people.

Kevin Stone

But we also know that people have scripture seems to say very clearly, that people have a genuine choice to make. The offer of salvation, as Jeff was mentioning, is a sincere one. That general call is is sincere. People who respond in faith to Christ will be saved, and it seems that they do have an actual choice. Here are just a few that I pulled out from from the New Testament. In Stephen's sermon there, right before he's martyred in Acts chapter 7, he's confronting the the Sanhedrin and this is a group of people that had rejected Jesus as the Messiah. And Stephen says to them in Act 7, verse 51, you men who are stiff necked and

uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit. You were doing just what your fathers did. So here they have a there's a clear case of people who were resisting the spirit and not allowing the spirit to do a work of change and transformation in their lives. In Luke seven, we have the Pharisees being described as rejecting God's will. We read this Luke 7, verse 30, the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves because they had not been baptized by John. And John's baptism was one of repentance. So this is saying that the Pharisees had rejected their need to repent, that we don't need that. And in so doing, they were rejecting God's purpose for themselves. They were resistant to God's will.

Kevin Stone

Jesus and in Matthew 23 he weeps over Jerusalem and he says Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her. How often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. Yet you were not willing. So Jesus doesn't say I I wanted to bring you to bring you in but but you couldn't because you were not part of the elect. He doesn't say that. He says I wanted to bring you in, but you didn't want to come. You had a seemed to have a choice in the matter. You have rejected your Messiah.

Kevin Stone

And then in Luke 18, as Jesus is speaking with the rich young ruler. Well, this is after the rich young ruler turns his back on Jesus and walks away. Says I'm gonna go count my money. I love my money more than I love Jesus. And so after he's gone, Jesus turns to his disciples here in Luke 18 and verses 24 and 25, he says how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God. Indeed, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. So that's, that's really a strange statement. And I I wonder how it squares exactly with irresistible grace? How is it harder or easier for some people to enter the Kingdom of God? It wouldn't be harder for God to draw a person to himself, God can save anyone, right? How? How is it hard? How is it? How is it easy?

Kevin Stone

I think this whole thing of being harder or easier has to do with a person's willingness or unwillingness to repent of the idolatry, in this context, specifically of the love money and to trust Christ. And so few passages here that, and there are others, that seem to say that yeah, we have we have a real choice. And God's grace can indeed be resisted.

Jeff Laird

Where I see this becoming an issue is that there's a broad agreement between believers and just about all of these points about things like the fact that God is sovereign, and we are frail, and we are weak and it's all his grace. It's not by works and things like that. I think what happens with irresistible grace is we take this idea of God's sovereignty and we want to elevate the concept of God's sovereignty, such that we almost turned it into like a self caricature. And I think that sometimes happens with irresistible grace. Some of the points that you were just bringing up, Kevin, I think, speak to that idea. It's why I'm not comfortable with the typical formulation of irresistible grace as a means of implying that if the traditional Calvinist view of irresistible grace is not true, that means God is not sovereign. Because we do see that people are, God allows people to resist. That he allows believers who are saved to choose not to do what he wants us to do. So if I'm a saved believer and God is allowing me the free will to sin, then either he is sovereignly ordaining that I commit those sins, or he is sovereignly allowing me to commit those sins because it's part of his greater plan.

Jeff Laird

Now, when it comes to salvation, though, the the typical formulation for irresistible grace and unconditional election does not allow for somebody to say God is sovereignly, allowing someone to come to salvation. It's saying that God is deliberately making a a choice to override, to engage, to interact in a way that that person is not capable of making any choice about. That's where we start to get into the difference between mystery and contradiction. So if, if it's impossible for somebody to make any decision and according to free will, without that somehow violating God's sovereignty, then what does that make of sin? If God only applies the idea of

irresistibility and sovereignty only to salvation but not to sanctification, then what does that mean?

Jeff Laird

So I think the terminology here again, I think is where we get hung up. It's the irresistible grace. There are other approaches to these ideas that have a very similar view. I've brought up my view in the past. People from my perspective, would prefer a term like overcoming grace. In other words, this is something where we would still say yes, God has to be the one to break through. God has to be the one to overcome something. But he's doing that in such a way that he gets me to the point where my will finally turns to him in response. And it's a little more complicated than that. It's not quite as easy. There's there's other analogies that we can use for that. The point is that there are ways for us to retain the positive, the good in what we see in irresistible grace without getting hung up in a legalistic version of the words. Like I have to go with just what those words mean, literally, and not what the Bible really implies.

Kevin Stone

Guys, when I'm preaching in a church setting, I'll give the gospel and then I have an invitation at the end of the service. And so during that invitation, I pray that people will respond. What I have never done is gone down the aisle, grab somebody by the collar, and dragged them up down the aisle to the altar, to force them to get saved. That's not my job. My job is to give the external call right, to present the gospel. And then I pray that God will break through whatever resistance is in these, in in a person's heart and draw that person to himself. So I I pray as if God's grace is irresistible, I want it to be irresistible. I want that person to be saved. And I know my job is simply to to extend that external call to give that gospel in an understandable way. So I preach as if it's all up to that person. Hey, you need to repent. You need to believe in Jesus. And I pray as if it's all up to God, Lord breakthrough and and save this person. Overcome whatever, whatever resistance they have.

Shea Houdmann

Kevin, you're kind of spoiling the last episode of this series where we talked about the practical implications, ok, if these, if these actions are true, how did that impact how we live? How does it impact how we share the gospel? But no, what you said there is very appropriate and that we want the gospel to be irresistible. We want people to come to faith in Christ. But ultimately, that's God's work. And as we've gone through different points, it's all a matter of we know God has a role in salvation beyond him just providing the means through Christ. And the kind of the debate between Calvinism and some other points is like, how much work. So for example, in each episode, I've kind of tried to show how the points of Calvinism logically flow, not because we necessarily agree with all the points fully as they're presented, but just to account, here's how it makes sense.

Shea Houdmann

So we start with total depravity. If humanity is so hopelessly and completely dead in sin that they could not believe in the gospel, cannot come to Christ without God actually first creating spiritual life in us, basically regenerating us to life, to enable us to even believe that God clearly is doing some sort of work. So some would debate that God doesn't have to do that much work, but it's pretty clear from like John 6:44 and other passages God does something. But if God has to regenerate a person, to enable them to believe well then clearly everyone who he regenerates are going to believe.

Shea Houdmann

So then we get to unconditional election. Well, if everyone God regenerates is going to believe, clearly he's only electing the ones whom he's going to regenerate. So that flows to their limited atonement. Well, if everyone he's died for it was the ones he's going to regenerate to believe and elect, then clearly he died for the ones he's going to elect. And they get irresistible grace. If God is regenerating us, basically instilling faith in us and clearly everyone whom he calls is inevitably going to come to salvation.

Shea Houdmann

So there's kind of how the four points up to now all flow together. But I think if you watch every episode, you hear us saying, look yes, this is one way of looking at the scriptural passages, but there are other solid, biblically plausible ways of understanding these things differently from Calvinism. I'd say each of us, to varying degrees leans more towards Calvinism than we do Arminianism. But in saying that, we do not think Calvinism is a perfect explanation because ultimately, as Jeff is talking about, there's the difference between mystery and contradiction. We don't believe there's a contradiction, but we believe every Christian is going to have to come to accepting that there's some mystery in this to how exactly the sovereignty of God and the human responsibility work together in salvation makes perfect sense in the mind of God, but for us this side of eternity, I don't know that we'll ever fully and perfectly understand how that works.

Jeff Laird

We also have to remember that there's there's a passage that for me sort of starts and ends all of my thoughts about how do I understand this? How do I understand God's will, and that's a passage in Romans 9 that gets brought up a lot when we talk about things like predestination. Basically this section of Romans 9 is the comparison to a potter and clay. And it's a question. It's a rhetorical question that's asked. It's basically what right does the clay have to criticize the potter for the way the potter shapes the clay? Could not God do with mankind what he wants is the gist of the question. And I think regardless of what view you take, I think that's one of those unquestionable non negotiables that we we cannot approach any of these from a standpoint of saying yeah, but if I don't like it, it can't be right. Or if I don't understand it, it can't be right. The most extreme versions of some of these ideas that we think of could God could choose to do those things. God could basically choose to say no. I don't allow free will almost in any sense whatsoever. But that's the potter and the clay. And then when somebody objects and says, yeah, but why? Why would God allow you know people to make this decision and not that? The potter and the clay. At at some point in time, we have to recognize that a lot of these things are possible. God can do this as he chooses, the way he wants to. And what we

don't want to do is put ourselves in a position where we say things like God can't or God shouldn't. Maybe even sometimes God wouldn't. So when we when we get into this, I think it's important that we remember that a lot of these ideas do have to start and end with the idea that my comfort level, my opinion, my, you know, my sense of preference on these things is not something that's supposed to come into play. And I say that in the sense that that's often a a concept that can be used in support of some of the Calvinist doctrines of grace.

Jeff Laird

Sometimes people just object to them on gut emotional grounds, and that's why a lot of Calvinists will reference to Romans 9 to say if God wants to create people a certain way, he can. I just remind people that, that works in both directions. That just because God has the sovereign power to do something, that would also mean he has the sovereign power to not do it if he so chooses. So how he wants to do it is how he's going to do it. My job is just to try to sort of understand as best I can and not force something into his word or his world based on what I want.

Shea Houdmann

Well said Jeff. And you hit the nail on the head with the the resistance a lot of people have towards Calvinism when it comes to I don't, I don't like it, I don't like any doctrine that tells me I'm not fully in control of my own destiny, my own choices. I don't like anything telling me I don't truly have a a free will, and so forth. And and this is coming from three individuals who would describe themselves as varying degrees, moderately Calvinistic, or even non Calvinistic. But it's the potter and the clay illustration. Like you said, God has the right to do with us as his creator, as he sees fit. And there's, like you said, Nebuchadnezzar, as Kevin mentioned earlier, like, who can hold back God's hand or who can resist God's plan? The answer is, is no one. So that's a a powerful reminder that no matter what view we've taken all this, we need to come to the realization that God is in control. God is sovereign and he's free to do with his creation as he sees fit. And Calvinism is one way people seek to explain how God operates in the realm of

salvation and human responsibility. And there are other explanations.

Shea Houdmann

So hopefully this conversation between the three of us on irresistible grace has been helpful to you in understanding what irresistible grace is, what it isn't, what may be biblical and or unbiblical about it. So that's our goal in this series on Calvinism is not to promote Calvinism. It's really not what we're about at all, but to help you understand so you can make a fully informed decision and also go back to the Scriptures and study these issues for yourself. So please hear that as our primary encouragement throughout this series. So this has been the Got Questions podcast on what is irresistible grace. Got questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.