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Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #20
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Sermon Summary #20

Three Impossibilities and the Sovereignty of God in Salvation John 6:35-40, 44, 65

[Churches often divide over certain theological issues, such as the role of women in ministry and leadership, charismatic gifts, water baptism (infant baptism vs. believer's baptism), and matters related to eschatology or the end times (the timing of the rapture, the role of Israel, etc.). One other issue that often becomes a bone of contention is the debate between Arminians and Calvinists and the extent of God's sovereignty in our salvation. God has been very kind to us at Bridgeway when it comes to this issue. And you have all responded in remarkably wise and mature ways when I have spoken on this subject. I have always told you that Bridgeway is a church where a wide variety of views are found, and that you do not have to agree with me on such matters to be a vital and contributing member of this church. I say this once again today because we have come to a passage in John's gospel that has the potential to create division, or at least a measure of discomfort in some of you. My aim today is what it is every Sunday: to do my best, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to explain what the Bible is saying to us. If you find yourself in disagreement with me on the subject of God's sovereignty in salvation, please don't panic or think that you are not welcome, loved, and highly valued at Bridgeway. I would simply encourage you to dig deeply into the text before us, pray, and be patient with me and with yourself as we strive to understand what God is saying. I also want to say something briefly about why we sometimes believe what we do.

Often the culprit is *tradition*: "That's what I was raised to believe. I can't bring myself to believe that mom and dad and the preacher and all my friends were wrong." This is a far more powerful influence, subtle and unconscious though it be, than most of us realize. *I'm not immune to this* anymore than you are. To be open to being persuaded of another view seems like we are saying, "The past meant nothing." To some it feels as if they must question the integrity or value of people and pastors that they love and respect and who've been a powerful influence in their lives. That is difficult for many to cope with.

Undoubtedly a major contributing factor is the presence in the NT of several so-called *problem passages*. Let's be honest: *every view has problem passages*! There are biblical texts that seem to run counter to what I will say to you. We have to deal honestly and fairly with them and ask the question: which view does the best job of accounting for everything the Bible says on this topic?

I suspect that many times we believe what we do, not so much because that's what the Bible says, but more because *it seems right and logical and fair to our way of thinking*. But what feels or seems right and true to us is not the standard by which we determine what is true. The only relevant question is: What does the Bible say? And if the Bible teaches something that we don't like or fully understand, we must submit to its authority and trust that God always does what is good and just.

Finally, many believe that the Calvinist or Reformed position on salvation, the view that I embrace, *diminishes a person's moral responsibility*. It places too much emphasis on God's sovereignty and not enough on human free will. I understand this concern and I hope to address it when appropriate.]

To whom do you give ultimate credit and praise for your salvation? That may sound like an easy question to answer. After all, I'm quite sure virtually all Christians will say, "God!" But let me push into the question a bit deeper. I'm not asking who made provision for your salvation. We all believe that God provided an atonement for our sins in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We all believe that God is the one who declares us righteous in his Son and adopts us into his family as sons and daughters.

What I'm asking is this: *Who is ultimately responsible for the decision you made to repent of your sin and to trust in Jesus for eternal life?* Note well. It was *your* decision. God didn't believe for you. You and I must believe in the

offer of life that is available in Jesus. But **how** did you come to make that decision? Was the decisive factor in your response to the gospel your own free will or the work of the Holy Spirit in granting you the faith to trust Christ?

We read in Luke 10 that the 72 disciples whom Jesus sent out have returned, rejoicing that “even the demons are subject to us in your name” (Luke 10:17). After Jesus affirms our authority over demonic spirits, he says this: “Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). So, how did their names and our names come to be written down in heaven? Twice in the book of Revelation we are told this:

“and all who dwell on earth will worship it [i.e., the Beast], everyone whose name has not been written down before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain” (Rev. 13:8).

“And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come” (Rev. 17:8).

Whether or not your name is written down in the lamb’s book of life is something that is determined **“before the foundation of the world.”** We see this again in something Paul says in Ephesians 1.

“even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the beloved” (Eph. 1:4-6).

Paul speaks yet again of this pre-temporal expression of God’s saving grace:

“share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:8b-9).

This is simply an expression of what is known as the doctrine of divine election or predestination. Let me state it simply:

Whereas all people in every age deserve eternal condemnation, before the foundation of the world God mercifully and graciously chose or elected or predetermined that some be saved. Divine justice calls for all mankind to die. But divine grace redeemed some of them to live.

I can’t stress enough how crucial it is that we all understand that no one deserves to be chosen by God. All of us deserve eternal condemnation. God does not owe us mercy and grace. If he “owed” us mercy and grace, that is, if he were obligated to show us mercy, it would cease to be mercy. The only thing God owes us is judgment, and the good news is that Jesus has endured that judgment for us if we will believe in him.

This is, in essence, what I believe Jesus is saying here in John 6. Jesus has just fed some 20,000 men, women, and children a full lunch, making use of only five loaves of bread and two fish. This was to serve as an illustration or object lesson concerning himself. “I am the bread of life,” said Jesus. “If you want to live forever, you must ingest and feed on me by faith.” And how did the masses respond to Jesus? The answer is given in several places:

“But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe” (v. 36).

“So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ They said, ‘Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’” (vv. 41-42).

“But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him)” (v. 64).

It is here, in the context of hard-hearted unbelief and rejection of Jesus as the bread of life, that we read about God's sovereignty in salvation. It is our Lord's way of making clear that he is neither surprised nor frustrated by the rejection of his claims. Those whom the Father has given him will believe, and it is his purpose to save them.

The best way to follow our Lord on this point is by looking at his words in terms of what I call *the three impossibilities*.

The First Impossibility

We look first at what Jesus says in John 6:44 and 65.

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day” (v. 44).

“And he said, ‘This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father’” (v. 65).

Jesus says it in no uncertain terms: It is morally and spiritually impossible for a person to come to Christ, that is, to believe in Christ, unless the Father draws him. Why is it impossible?

It isn't impossible because men and women lack a will with which to make decisions. It isn't because they lack a mind to think and deliberate on the meaning of the gospel. It isn't because they lack the opportunity to believe. Their not coming to Christ is due to their moral and spiritual refusal to do so. And this is a decision on their part in which they willingly and freely delight. If they “cannot” come it is not because God won't let them. It is because it is their nature and desire *not to want* to come.

You may be asking at this point: But what about free will? Let me define “free will” as I think the Bible defines it.

Your will is free to do whatever your heart desires. Your character determines your choices.

As long as you are not coerced to do something that is contrary to your desires or hindered from doing something that is an expression of your desires, you are free. So, the important question isn't, “Is my will free?” The important question is, “What is the condition of my heart, soul, and mind?” And I believe the consistent testimony of Scripture is that we are by nature fallen, spiritually blind, and hard-hearted, without any inclination to see the beauty of God or the truth of the gospel. Among the numerous texts that teach this, I'll mention only three.

“as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes’” (Rom. 3:10-18).

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:1-3).

“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity” (Eph. 4:17-19).

The consistent testimony of Scripture is that the unregenerate, unbelieving heart, the heart that is not born again, hates God, hates Christ, hates righteousness, loves sin, loves self, loves the darkness, and has no desire to know or to follow what God has revealed in Jesus.

Thus the only way that you or I or anyone else will ever choose to believe in Jesus is if God in sovereign grace does what he is not obligated to do, namely, cause us to be born again and give us a new heart and a new mind that loves God and loves Christ and loves the good news of the gospel. In our natural, sinful, fallen, and unregenerate condition we all freely hate the light and love the darkness.

When Paul preached the gospel for the first time in Philippi, one person who listened was a woman named Lydia. It is said of her that “the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14). If you are a believer today, it is because at some point in your past God caused you to be born again and opened your heart and drew you with everlasting and irresistible love so that you might see, believe, and delight in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is a false understanding, a caricature, of this doctrine that must be addressed. Some think that this means there are a people who want to be saved and forgiven but God says “No, I’m sorry. I didn’t elect you. I didn’t give you to the Son. I’m not going to draw you even though you want to be drawn.”

No! ***If anyone wants to be saved, he/she will be saved.*** If anyone wants to believe it is because God has elected them and given them to the Son and is in the process of drawing them to himself. God never prevents or prohibits anyone from believing in Jesus. If people don’t believe in Jesus, it is because they don’t want to believe. It isn’t because God won’t let them. They ***do not*** come to Christ because they ***will not*** come to Christ, not because God is hindering or prohibiting them from coming.

The Second Impossibility

The first impossibility stated by our Lord is that it is impossible to come to him unless the Father draws him/her. The second impossibility is that it is impossible ***not*** to come when the Father ***does*** draw him/her.

This is what Jesus means when he says in v. 37 – “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (v. 37).

He doesn’t say they “might” come or that we “hope” and “pray” that they will come, but that they ***will*** come! It is ***impossible*** for them ***not*** to come to Christ if the Father draws them. In other words, all whom the Father has given to the Son, all whom the Father has chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4) ***will*** come to faith in Christ. The Father will never fail to draw to salvation those whom he has given to the Son. This is the doctrine of irresistible grace or effectual grace.

This doesn’t mean the elect come to faith in Jesus the first time they hear the gospel. They may well resist and defy the gospel throughout the entirety of their lives. But it does mean that no one who is elect or has been given by the Father to the Son will fail to come to saving faith before they die. It is impossible that God would fail to draw to faith those whom he has given to his Son. That is the clear and unmistakable assertion of John 6:37.

Jesus describes this in v. 44 with the word ***“draws”***. In v. 65 he says that in order to come to Jesus or to believe in Jesus it must be ***“granted”*** by the Father. He is talking about the work of the Holy Spirit in graciously giving us the gift of repentance and faith. Repentance and faith are not in the power of the unregenerate heart to produce. God must ***“grant”*** us or ***“give”*** us faith and repentance (Acts 11:18; Eph. 2:8-10; Phil. 1:29; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; 2 Peter 1:1). He is under no obligation to do so. It is entirely an act of mercy and grace.

To be ***“given”*** by the Father to the Son is to be elected, chosen, or predestined to inherit eternal life. We know that not all have been ***“given”*** to the Son, because not all are saved. In John 17:2 Jesus declared that the Father has ***“given”*** him ***“authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.”*** Clearly, then, if you have been ***“given”*** by the Father to the Son you will come to faith in Jesus and receive eternal life. This is what Jesus is saying in John 6:37 when he declares that ***“all that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”*** The very purpose of Jesus coming to earth was to do the will of the Father. And what is that will? He tells us in v. 39 – ***“And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has ***given*** me, but raise it up on the last day.”***

The Third Impossibility

What have we seen thus far? We've seen Jesus declare two impossibilities. First, he said it is impossible for the unregenerate person to come to him unless the Father draws him. Second, he said it is impossible for a person not to come to him in faith once the Father has drawn him. Now he states the third impossibility. When a person comes to him through the drawing of the Father, it is impossible for him to be turned away or cast out. Look at how Jesus says this in vv. 37-40.

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:37-40).

Notice that three times in the span of four verses Jesus declares that it is impossible for someone whom the Father has given him and drawn to him, to ever be cast out or not reach the end of life saved and secure: “I will never cast out” / “I should lose nothing of all that he has given me” / “I will raise him up on the last day”. If that were not enough, Jesus says it yet again in v. 44 – “and I will raise him up on the last day.”

This, Jesus says, is the “will” of my Father, that all he has given me come to me and that all who come to me be raised up saved and secured and glorified on that final day. There are several other texts in the NT that, in my opinion, reinforce with unmistakable clarity this truth. I want to spend our remaining time today reading through these with you.

“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand” (John 10:28-29).

“Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:9-10).

“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29-30).

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31-32).

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:35-39).

“so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:7-9).

“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thess. 5:23-24).

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable,

undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:3-5).

"Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen" (Jude 24-25).

You may respond to this by pointing out that I did not cite any of the problem passages, those biblical texts that contain warnings against falling away. And you are correct. Time simply doesn't allow us to look at them. But I do not ignore them. In my book, *Kept for Jesus* (Crossway), I address virtually all of these texts and try to demonstrate how they are easily explained and encompassed within the view that those who come to faith in Jesus Christ are preserved by God safe and secure until the final day.

Conclusion

I want to close by telling you a true story that I shared when I preached on this subject several years ago. It is a story that I believe illustrates well the truth that we find in John 6 concerning the security of the believer. It was 1984, our daughter Melanie was about to turn six years of age, and all she wanted was for us to take her to the Texas State Fair. We were living in Dallas at the time and didn't want to disappoint her. However, the city had been filled with disturbing reports of young children being snatched while playing in their own backyards. I can still recall reading in the *Dallas Morning News* a warning to all parents who planned on taking their children to the fair. They were instructed to keep their children close at hand and not let them wander off along the midway. We took it to heart!

The fair was an incredibly entertaining event, especially for a six-year old girl who wanted to jump on every ride and eat everything she could lay her hands on. As we ventured down the midway, Melanie would constantly struggle to break free of my grip on her hand. She was first drawn to the Ferris wheel and then to a game of darts, and after that to the bumper cars and then to the booth selling cotton candy. She grew increasingly frustrated by my refusal to let her run free. But I assured her again and again that there wasn't the slightest chance that I would *ever* let go of her hand, no matter how energetically she pulled to break free or how loudly she complained on being kept by my side. Although she was a precocious child at six, I don't think she fully grasped my commitment to her as a father. She likely interpreted my refusal to let her run wild as the fearful and anxious strategy of an overly-protective and controlling parent whose primary aim was to rob her of the joys she otherwise might have experienced.

After more than two hours of this tug-of-war Melanie showed no signs of giving up. If anything, her stubborn little six-year-old heart had intensified in the determination to have her way along the midway, her daddy's persistent grip notwithstanding. My question for you is this. What would you have thought of me had I said to her: "Fine! I've had enough of your nonsense. If you want to get yourself kidnapped and abused, go ahead. Have at it. I'm done with you. Your refusal to be grateful for my loving protection has worn me down," spoken in a disillusioned tone as I let go of her hand and watched passively as she wandered into a potentially deadly crowd. I know what you would have thought, as I would have thought of you if it were your child: "What an incredibly unloving and weak-willed father! I can't believe your alleged devotion to your child and your purported concern for her welfare could so easily dissipate under the pressure she imposed on you. What a jerk! If possible, I'd bring charges against you and make sure you suffered the full penal extent of the law."

No matter how frustrated or exhausted or disappointed I may have grown with her efforts to break free, nothing in this world could have induced me to let go of her hand. And don't forget, I'm a fallen, selfish, and sinful man. Yet, my depravity notwithstanding, I would never, by no means ever, let go of my child and release her into a potentially dangerous crowd of strangers. Now, if I, being evil, am committed to the ultimate safety and welfare of my child, how much more is your heavenly Father, being good, committed to yours! If it is inconceivable to me even remotely to consider the option of abandoning my child, how much less is it a possibility that your heavenly Father would ever dream of abandoning you. If I was willing to do everything imaginable to keep my little girl safe from life-threatening circumstances, including patiently enduring her incessant whining and lack of gratitude for such efforts, how much more will your heavenly Father do whatever is required to keep you safely and savingly embraced in his arms.

Of this you can be certain, and in it you may rest assured: Your loving and gracious heavenly Father will never let go of your hand; he will never, by no means ever, leave you or forsake you, or ever allow you to leave or forsake him!