THE GOSPEL LESSON 24

ARMINIAN THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 1

The Five Articles Weighed

Philippians 1:6 – *For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*

WHERE WE ARE

The last lesson closed the review of Reformed Theology with a verdict at two levels. The first four points make claims about God: His decree, His choice, the extent of the provision, and the manner of His grace. They add no condition to a gospel that is heard, believed, and sealed (Ephesians 1:13), and so they are a disagreement in theology, this is an important distinction but, on their own, is not another gospel. The fifth point is different in kind. Perseverance of the Saints makes a life that shows the works necessary for final salvation, and a condition added after faith is the error called "a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6). Taken as a whole, Reformed Theology is a false gospel. However, there are some, if not many, who are brethren who hold to some of the points in Reformed Theology. We do not evaluate the salvation of another. We do evaluate a system, a message, a theology, and Reformed Theology is, on many levels, unbiblical (Hermeneutics, Israel-Replacement Theology, Determinism, Eschatology, Use of the Law, Baptism as a seal, Infant Baptism, and Means of Grace). We focused on the Gospel and did not do a complete review of the theology.

Arminian Theology is the other side of that same argument. It was the system the Synod of Dort was called to answer, and the Canons of Dort are a reply to it point by point. This lesson applies the same test to it. Where Arminian Theology makes claims about God and His grace, the question is whether it adds a condition to heard, believed, sealed. Where it addresses salvation, we call that out specifically. This is not a complete review of the theology.

I. WHERE ARMINIAN THEOLOGY COMES FROM

Jacob Arminius (1560–1609) was a Dutch Reformed pastor and later professor of theology at Leiden. He did not set out to create a system. He objected to the doctrine of predestination as it was taught in the Dutch churches, and in 1608 he set out his reasons before the States of Holland in his *Declaration of Sentiments*. He died the next year.

In 1610 his followers presented a statement to the States of Holland called the Remonstrance. It contained five articles, and those who signed it came to be called Remonstrants. The Synod of Dort met in 1618 and 1619, condemned the five articles, and answered them in five heads of doctrine. The acrostic TULIP is a much later summary of Dort's answer. The order of history matters here: the five points of Calvinism are a reply to the five articles of the Remonstrance.

A century later John Wesley (1703–1791) carried Arminian Theology into Methodism, and from there it spread into the Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal churches. It is also held by Free Will Baptists and, in practice, by a great many Baptists and independent churches. Many churchgoers who are not Reformed hold some form of it without knowing the name.

The Remonstrance is short, and it is the fairest place to hear the system in its own words.

II. WHAT IS AFFIRMED

God's love and Christ's death are for all. The second article reads:

> *That, agreeably thereto, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, died for all men and for every man, so that he has obtained for them all, by his death on the cross, redemption and the forgiveness of sins; yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer. (Remonstrance, Article 2)*

The article supports itself with John 3:16 and 1 John 2:2, and we read 1 John 2:2 the same way: "He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." 2 Peter 2:1 speaks of false teachers "denying the Master who bought them." The verb is ἀγοράζω *agorazō*, a commercial verb, and those men perish. The provision is for all, and it is received by believing. On this point the Remonstrants and the Scriptures agree, and Lesson 19 found that Reformed Theology does not.

No one believes apart from grace. A common charge against Arminian Theology is that it lets man save himself: God offers salvation, and man secures it by the strength of his own free will. The third article says the opposite. It states that man, in his fallen condition, "can of and by himself neither think, will, nor do any thing that is truly good (such as saving Faith eminently is)" (Remonstrance, Article 3). The Remonstrants held that no one comes to faith on his own; God must act first. Arminius said the same of the whole Christian life: "I ascribe to grace the commencement, the continuance and the consummation of all good" (*Declaration of Sentiments*, IV). The beginning, the middle, and the end he credited to God.

This bears on a label often attached to Arminians. Pelagius was a British monk of the early fifth century who taught that Adam's sin did not damage human nature, so that any person could obey God and live righteously by his own natural ability, without any inward help from God. The church condemned that teaching at the Council of Carthage in 418. Reformed writers frequently call Arminian Theology Pelagian, or "semi-Pelagian," because it holds that man can refuse grace. The articles themselves do not teach what Pelagius taught; they say man can neither believe nor do good without grace. The disagreement between Arminian and Reformed Theology is not whether grace is necessary, but whether grace can be resisted, and that is the subject of the fourth article.

Grace can be resisted. The fourth article says of the grace of God, "as respects the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not irresistible, inasmuch as it is written concerning many, that they have resisted the Holy Ghost" (Remonstrance, Article 4, citing Acts 7). Arminius put the whole controversy in one question: "is the grace of God a certain irresistible force?" (*Declaration of Sentiments*, IV). Previously we answered that question from the text. "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51). "How often I wanted to gather your children together... and you were unwilling" (Matthew 23:37).

God is not the author of sin. Arminius rejected the decree of reprobation because it made God the cause of the sin He punishes. We also addressed this and reached a similar conclusion about the first four point of Reformed Theology: they misstate God's character, because the God of Scripture loves the very ones He will judge.

III. WHAT IS SEPARATED

Three claims in Arminian Theology go beyond what the texts state. None of them is the point where the system reaches the gospel, but each needs to be named.

1. Election on foreseen faith. The first article says God determined "to save in Christ, for Christ's sake, and through Christ, those who, through the grace of the Holy Ghost, shall believe on this his Son Jesus" (Remonstrance, Article 1). Arminius stated the ground of that decree:

> *To these succeeds the fourth decree, by which God decreed to save and damn certain particular persons. This decree has its foundation in the foreknowledge of God, by which he knew from all eternity those individuals who would, through his preventing grace, believe, and, through his subsequent grace would persevere... (*Declaration of Sentiments*, I.6)*

The first half of that is agreement. God saves in Christ, for His sake, and those who believe. The separation is in the ground. Arminius made the election of individuals rest on God's foresight of their faith. We have found that Ephesians 1:4 places the choosing "in Him," ἐν αὐτῷ *en autō*. Christ is the Chosen One, and the church is chosen in Him to holiness, adoption, and inheritance. No one was a believer before the foundation of the world, so the choice does not rest on a faith that did not yet exist. The foreknowledge of Romans 8:29, προγινώσκω *proginōskō*, is God, who stands outside time, speaking in terms men can grasp. It does not describe God looking down a corridor of time to see who would believe. Reformed Theology grounds election of individuals in a bare decree. Arminian Theology grounds it in foreseen faith. Scripture grounds it in the Son, and the election is about the benefits and function of believers, not a choosing of the person to be a believer

The decree also says more than "believe." It says "and... would persevere." The first article says the same: those God decreed to save are those who "shall persevere in this faith and obedience of faith, through this grace, even to the end" (Remonstrance, Article 1). That phrase will matter in the fifth article.

2. Prevenient grace. The fourth article names a grace that goes before: "the regenerate man himself, without prevenient or assisting, awakening, following and cooperative grace, can neither think, will, nor do good" (Remonstrance, Article 4). Wesley made that grace universal and identified it with conscience:

> *No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed preventing grace. (Wesley, Sermon 85,* On Working Out Our Own Salvation*, III.4)*

The Church of the Nazarene confesses it today: "the grace of God through Jesus Christ is freely bestowed upon all people, enabling all who will to turn from sin to righteousness, believe on Jesus Christ for pardon and cleansing from sin, and follow good works pleasing and acceptable in His sight" (Articles of Faith, VII).

What is affirmed is that God takes the initiative, and that He seeks all men. What is separated is the mechanism. Scripture states how God draws: "It is written in the prophets, 'AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me" (John 6:45). "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself" (John 12:32). The Spirit "will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me" (John 16:8–9). "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). The drawing is through the Word of the cross, and it reaches all who hear it. Grace given to every person to restore the capacity to believe is not stated in any of these texts.

Wesley's own example shows the step. Romans 2:14 says that Gentiles without the Law "do instinctively the things of the Law." The word is φύσις *phusis*, here in the dative, "by nature." Romans calls conscience natural. Wesley says "this is not natural" and renames it grace. The text does not support this doctrine.

Prevenient grace answers a premise that Arminian and Reformed Theology hold in common. Both read "dead in your trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1) as the loss of every capacity to respond to God. Reformed Theology supplies the capacity to the elect by regeneration before faith. Arminian Theology supplies it to everyone by prevenient grace. We have found the premise itself unstated. Death in Scripture is separation from God, and the same "dead" men of Ephesians 2:1 are "walking according to the course of this world" in the next verse. They can hear, and the Holy Spirit persuades through the Word they hear. Scripture does not need either repair because it does not teach the defect they repair.

3. Grace as an infused power. Arminius described grace as "an infusion (both into the human understanding and into the will and affections,) of all those gifts of the Holy Spirit which appertain to the regeneration and renewing of man," and he names faith first among those gifts (*Declaration of Sentiments*, IV). Lesson 21 found the Reformed system redefining grace as a power that must bring about change. Arminius uses the same category, with the difference that the power can be refused. Scripture uses grace for God's favor toward the undeserving (Romans 4:4; 11:6), and it names faith as being persuaded by what God has said (Romans 4:21), not as a quality poured in.

The verdict on these three. Each of these is a claim about God's decree or the manner of His grace. None of them adds a condition to hearing, believing, and sealing. The Arminian believer is told to believe the promise of God in Christ, and on that point, he has heard the gospel and can preach it. These are disagreements in theology and does not speak to one's salvation. In one respect the disagreement is narrower than the one with Reformed Theology, because Arminian Theology does not reassign God's love. It says, with John 3:16, that God loved the world.

IV. THE FIFTH ARTICLE

The fifth article is where Arminian Theology reaches the gospel. It begins with the keeping of the believer, and it begins well:

> *That those who are incorporated into Christ by a true faith, and have thereby become partakers of his life-giving Spirit, have thereby full power to strive against Satan, sin, the world, and their own flesh, and to win the victory; it being well understood that it is ever through the assisting grace of the Holy Ghost; and that Jesus Christ assists them through his Spirit in all temptations, extends to them his hand, and if only they are ready for the conflict, and desire his help, and are not inactive, keeps them from falling, so that they, by no craft or power of Satan, can be misled nor plucked out of Christ's hands, according to the Word of Christ, John x. 28: "Neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." (Remonstrance, Article 5)*

The article quotes John 10:28 and then places a condition in front of it: "if only they are ready for the conflict, and desire his help, and are not inactive." John 10:28 has no such clause. "I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand." Lesson 18 found the ground of that promise entirely outside the sheep.

The article then leaves the question open:

> *But whether they are capable, through negligence, of forsaking again the first beginnings of their life in Christ, of again returning to this present evil world, of turning away from the holy doctrine which was delivered them, of losing a good conscience, of becoming devoid of grace, that must be more particularly determined out of the Holy Scripture, before we ourselves can teach it with the full persuasion of our minds. (Remonstrance, Article 5)*

Arminius had said the same two years earlier: "I never taught that a true believer can, either totally or finally fall away from the faith, and perish; yet I will not conceal, that there are passages of scripture which seem to me to wear this aspect" (*Declaration of Sentiments*, V).

The question did not stay open. By the Synod of Dort, the Remonstrants had concluded that true believers can fall from faith and perish. Wesley wrote that "one who is holy or righteous in the judgment of God himself may nevertheless so fall from God as to perish everlastingly" (*Serious Thoughts upon the Perseverance of the Saints*, 1751). The Church of the Nazarene confesses, "We believe that all persons may fall from grace and apostatize and, unless they repent of their sins, be hopelessly and eternally lost" (Articles of Faith, VIII).

The open question was always closer to settled than it looked. The first article had already defined those God decreed to save as those who "shall persevere in this faith and obedience of faith... even to the end." If the elect are the ones who persevere, then a believer who does not persevere is not among them. The condition was in the decree before it was in the fifth article.

Two streams. Arminians today divide on what forfeits salvation. Reformation Arminians, among them many Free Will Baptists, hold that eternal life is lost only by ceasing to believe, and that it cannot be regained. Wesleyan and Holiness Arminians hold that it can also be lost by sin and regained by repentance. The Nazarene articles state the condition plainly: "glorious and everlasting life is assured to all who savingly believe in, and obediently follow, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Articles of Faith, XVI.2).

What is affirmed. The first stream sees one thing that Reformed Theology denies. A believer can stop believing. Westminster says believers "can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace" (WCF 17.1), and we previously found that 2 Timothy 2:13 supposes the opposite case: "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself." On the first half of that verse, the Arminian reads it as it stands, and Westminster does not.

What is separated. The second half of the verse answers the case, and the answer is not that the man is lost. It is that God remains faithful, "for He cannot deny Himself." The keeping rests on the character of the One who keeps. The second stream adds obedience to belief as the condition of everlasting life. That is the same requirement found in Lordship Salvation, placed at the end of the Christian life instead of at its beginning.

V. THE MIRROR

Set the two systems side by side at the fifth point.

> *They whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved. (WCF 17.1)*

> *...those who, through the grace of the Holy Ghost, shall believe on this his Son Jesus, and shall persevere in this faith and obedience of faith, through this grace, even to the end. (Remonstrance, Article 1)*

Both sentences place eternal salvation at the end of a perseverance in faith and obedience. They disagree on one point: whether God guarantees that the perseverance will happen. Westminster says He does, and so a man who fails was never a believer. The Remonstrants say He does not, and so a man who fails was a believer and is lost. The requirement is the same in both. The two systems look like opposites, and at the one point that touches the gospel they agree. Even though the disagree as to the how, Calvin and Arminius walk out of the debate holding hands agreeing that perseverance and obedience are necessary for final salvation.

The result for the believer is the same as well. Under Reformed Theology a man cannot be certain he is among the elect until his perseverance is complete. Under Arminian Theology, a man can be certain he has eternal life today and cannot be certain he will have it tomorrow. In neither system does the promise settle the question by itself. Scripture writes so that the believer can know: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). The life is described as possessed and the passage as finished: "he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24).

Galatians asked the question both systems answer: "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3). The two verbs are ἐνάρχομαι *enarchomai*, to begin, and ἐπιτελέω *epiteleō*, to bring to completion. They stand together in only one other place in the New Testament:

> *For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)*

The same two verbs answer the question Galatians asked. The One who began is the One who completes. "Began" is an aorist participle: the work had its beginning at a point in time. "Will perfect" is a future indicative, a statement of what God will do, and its subject is God alone. The work is singular and it is His. It is not the believer's service, and it is not the believer's continuance. Philippians 1:6 does not say that God will complete the work if the believer is ready for the conflict, or that the completion will show who was truly His. It says He will complete it.

VI. THE GOSPEL IN SCRIPTURE

Arminian Theology hears God's love for the world and preaches it. It hears that Christ died for every man, that the provision is received by believing, and that grace can be refused. In all of that it stands with the text. Where it adds that the believer must continue in order to finish what God began, it joins Reformed Theology in the one place where both leave the text.

Scripture does not place the completion of salvation in the believer's hands at either end. "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" (Ephesians 2:8–9). The gift is received at the moment of faith: "after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation, having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1:13). The seal is God's, and so is the finish. "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).