



Inspired And Uncomfortable | Why Does God Choose Some And Not Others?

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Good Morning, Menlo Church, and welcome! I'm so glad to be back with you today, and honestly, just back on solid ground. We spent much of the last week at sea; it's a story for a different day. I'm especially sensitive if you are joining us today from airport Wi-Fi, a hotel room, or Airbnb, wherever you are around the world this summer. We're so glad that you're with us. And from all of our campuses to Saratoga, Mountain View, Menlo Park, and San Mateo, we're so glad that you're here today for this important conversation.

Over these first few weeks of our series, we've covered some major topics about passages and concepts from the Bible that often get

overlooked. These are questions that, when they surface, we aren't always sure how to handle well or the best way to talk about them. So, a lot of times, we just don't. We're spending some time this summer trying to address some of those.

Last week, Jevon gave us a glimpse into how we interpret eschatology, or the study of the end times, and the unique relationship that God has with Israel. If at the end of it, you were like, "Yeah, I'm really confused," you heard it correctly. It's a hard, nuanced topic. If you missed it, you can check it out online. I do not think that topic is going anywhere.

This week, we are going to build on some of the same tensions that we discussed last week with this question: Why does God choose some and not others? For some of you, you're like, "I didn't know that God chose some and not others." And so, you're like, "I'm very interested and I have questions if that's true." That's what we're going to dive into today.

Maybe another way to say that would be, "Why does God seem to play favorites?" Last week, we explored God's unique relationship with the people of Israel and how we approach it with nuance and wisdom today, even as we continue to see so much of that in the headlines.

Before we go any further, though, I'm going to pray for us. If you've never been here before or never heard me speak, before I speak, I pray kneeling. It's out of a deep sense of humility and appreciation that God would choose to set his love on me, such an undeserving person, not only to experience it but to have a chance to share it with people just like you. Would you pray with me?

God, thank you so much. Thank you that no matter what brought us online today, what brought us into the room today, no matter what was true of the week before us or the week behind us, God, would you just show up in a special way? Help us to grow in our appreciation and love of you today. Even as we explore the difficult and challenging conversations this summer, out of them, God, help us to

have a better and grander view of you and a deeper sense of your love for us. It's in Jesus' name. Amen.

Over the last month, you've probably heard a phrase a lot in culture. You saw it in TV ads. You saw it scrolling. You saw it just around. I want you to finish the phrase for me. The phrase goes like this: Love is...

You're allowed to say it in church: Love is love. Now, this phrase is our post-Christian culture's way of saying that love is self-formulated, that we get to determine it. It's whatever we want it to be, and no one can put any qualifiers or conditions on it.

Now, that's not actually true, though. And I would argue everybody knows that's not true. There are tons of qualifiers. Even in a post-Christian secular culture, there are qualifiers. We say that, but we don't mean that. Things about consent, the age of the people that we're discussing, power dynamics, even the definitions of harm. I'm

not arguing against any of those qualifiers. I think they are relevant and important.

What they reveal is that love isn't actually love. It's not self-determined. But this becomes an even more problematic approach when we bring our self-constructed view of love to God.

See, I think oftentimes, even if you're a Christian, when we say something like "God is love" informed by the formation of the culture around us, what we really mean is "God is what I want him to be."

There's a famous quote from Tim Keller where he says, "If the God that you worship never disagrees with you, you don't worship the God of the Bible. You worship an idealized version of yourself."

Sorry, but what we're going to talk about and explore today will put some of us into a spot that I was in as a 19-year-old college student.

See, I had grown up in a church where none of this was discussed this way. When I was exposed to it, God challenged me with this question: Do you love God as he revealed himself or as you have constructed him?

Now, I know that usually when I start a message, I try to start it lighthearted. I come up with a fun joke, you know. But how right now would you answer that question? Do you love the God that has revealed himself to you or the one you have constructed? And right now, if you go, "I don't know," that's a totally okay answer. But I think asking that question throughout our journey with God is really important.

Over the course of this series, we have built a toolbox for ways that we can study the Bible more responsibly, and we're going to need most of what we've put into that toolbox so far for our study today.

Context is king will remind us to look at more than a single verse.

Authorial intent will challenge us to examine what was meant at the time and to the people it was written. Scripture interpreting scripture will help us work towards clarity on a difficult topic. And today, I want to introduce you to one more: theological paradox.

In other words, there are topics in which two seemingly opposing truths can live in tension. And that tension is part of the discovery.

Now, at that time when I was 19 years old and I was wrestling with this topic specifically, here's the passage I was reading: "As it is written, Jacob I loved, and Esau I hated. What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means.

"For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy.

For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up that I may show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."

"You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?' But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?"

"What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles?"

(Romans 9:13-24)

Feeling that a little bit? You're like, "Phil, can you tell us a story about your kids?" See, the Apostle Paul, he's writing the most comprehensive document outlining the historic timeline for the theological clarity of and the personal implications surrounding the gospel, the good news of Jesus.

And here he is bringing up the greatest hits that they had ever heard: the people from Jewish history that God took direct action with. Jacob, Esau, Moses, Pharaoh—times when God intervened to help Israel survive in a culture and climate that they wouldn't have made it through on their own. But looking at this in hindsight, we see that God did much more than create conditions. He shaped decisions, and he's still doing it today.

Now, I grew up in a small Baptist church with the best and kindest people, as well as pastors who genuinely cared about me. However, I also heard phrases because this wasn't a heavily talked about topic,

phrases like this that felt nice but just weren't rooted in the truth of scripture.

Phrases like, "God is a perfect gentleman. He will never push himself on others. He waits until you decide." A concept we never find in the scriptures. Or how about this one: "God is standing at the door of your heart and he's knocking. He's waiting, hoping you will let him in." A passage not about salvation or evangelism, but a passage taken out of context written to a specific church in the book of Revelation.

Or how about this one: "God is waiting for you to make the first move," which in 2025 feels a little cringey, right? I grew up with these kinds of phrases trying to turn into a construct that you and I ultimately are responsible and equally capable of finding God on our own. And now here I was, facing an existential crisis that this version of love that I had given God came from my mind, not his.

The Apostle Paul is essentially saying that God gets to decide much more than you think, and he isn't giving you a vote. The clay doesn't get a vote to the potter.

So, this week and next, we are exploring a theological category called soteriology, or the study of salvation. It explores how we understand the unbelievable and indescribable, the incalculable manifestation of God's true love that he used to save us.

Now, this is where the word "love" becomes a little tricky, right, because of the different understandings of love that have shaped God's approach to saving people. But before we get on to all that, I want to make sure you understand just how central your need and my need for salvation really is. We don't need to be fine-tuned. We don't need a software update. We need to be brought back from the dead.

The fact that God is choosing to save anyone is pretty miraculous, to be honest. When we consider verses like these: "You were dead in the trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1)." Who's "you"? All of us.

Or how about this one: "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" (Romans 3:10-12). That's what you came to church for.

How about this one: "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God. For it does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:7-8). And one more: "In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." (2 Corinthians 4:7-8)

So that idea of a theological paradox, right? We're going to talk about that. It comes into play because even though I know that all of what we just read is true, and to be honest, kind of self-evident even if

you're not a follower of Jesus today. Some of that feels maybe extreme, but you're like, "Yeah, as I look around the world, things don't seem like they're getting better on their own. It feels like if human beings were generally good and we could figure this out, peace and prosperity would abound. All the headlines would be about puppies being saved and kids doing great. It doesn't seem like we're crushing it."

But then there's this other part that we read in the Bible that increases the tension because we also read passages like this: "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

Or how about this: "This is good and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4). How about this: "Because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with

the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." (Romans 10:9-10)

Are you confused yet? Welcome to a conversation that is thousands of years old. Here's the thing: When we aren't accustomed to considering theological paradoxes, when we just lean into one of these and don't consider the other, it's very disorienting to look at both of them together this closely. You're like, "Wait a second. Which one is true?" Both. And theological categories and camps get created because we want to live without tension. But theological paradoxes introduce the idea that tension is part of the design.

And so I want to show you some of the big, broad categories that are a part of this conversation inside of soteriology. There are kind of like two big camps that we see here. And don't worry, all this is going to look beautiful and no words are going to be misspelled, I'm sure of it.

Over here is Arminianism. And inside of Arminianism, underneath Arminianism, I tried my best. Underneath Arminianism, you see an emphasis on free will. You get to make the decision. Everybody has equal opportunity to choose God. That one gets sprinkled in a lot.

On the other side of this, we have Calvinism. Calvinism sits inside of a broader theological construct called reformed theology. And inside of Calvinism, we see the idea of God's sovereignty. God's sovereignty is simply the idea that he is in control of everything. Now, most people are not just on one of these with no tension.

The theological paradox idea says we're probably all somewhere along this trajectory from one to the other. And there are extremes.

So, sometimes on Arminianism's side with an emphasis on free will, we will end up with something called open theism. Open theism is the idea that God can only know the knowable. So if he knows a future

decision that you're going to make, then he actually is somehow informing that decision that you're going to make. So he can't know it.

As a result, this God sometimes gets described as powerless. He would help if he could, but he doesn't want to intervene and disrupt human will. Think about that on a cosmic level, right? That's what's happening over here.

Over here, the extreme is something usually just referred to as hyper-Calvinism. That idea is that we have to take the idea that God knows and has determined who's going to know him and who hasn't, and we reimagine scripture to remove the tension. So they'll even go to passages like John 3:16, which even if you're not a church person, you know, right? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him will not perish but experience everlasting life."

A hyper-Calvinist would say when we read "for God so loved the world" what we're really reading is "for God so loved the elect." Not the whole world, not in the passage, but it's how it gets imagined when we remove the tension. This God, the extreme over here, can sometimes feel heartless. So one God is powerless; God is heartless. He would help if he wanted to, but he doesn't, and so he won't. And so we're recognizing that there is a tension between God's sovereignty and human free will.

Within this conversation on the Calvinism side, I want to give you an acronym if you've never been exposed to this idea before. The acronym is TULIP. Even I can't misspell that one. It stands for this:

- T is total depravity. It doesn't mean that you and I are as bad as we could possibly be. It means that we're all bad.

Comprehensive sin has rooted through the whole world. We all need salvation.

- U is unconditional election. Who God picks is not up for debate or negotiation.

- **L is limited atonement. It means that the grace of God is sufficient for everyone but efficient. It only actually saves those who respond.**
- **I is irresistible grace. Those God has elected, and those to whom his grace has extended, they actually can't outrun it. God will chase them down.**
- **P stands for perseverance of the saints or sometimes eternal security. It's simply the idea, this is actually Paul's point in Romans 9, that if you didn't save yourself, the good news is you can't unsave yourself.**

If you want to explore more, there's lots that you can find in the midst of this. I would say this: If you have ever thought to yourself, "What would it feel like to go to Bible college?" kind of this, like you do some of this. Some of you were, somebody said to me after last service, they were like, "Hey, you gave me enough. I don't really need any more." And that's totally fine. And then I heard from some of you that were like, "Oh, this was so helpful. I want to learn more. I'm

confused." Which I would say, "Great." That probably means you're listening.

If you're trying to dive in deeper, I've tried to put resources really easy to find this week at menlo.church/connect. There's just a button that says "message resources" with books and videos and podcasts that if you want to dig a little bit deeper, you can find them there.

The debate about which side you are on and how we understand this—that debate has been going on for literally thousands of years. Menlo and myself personally, we fall in the more Calvinist or reformed theology understanding of salvation. But I believe there is a theological tension. There is a paradox that God loves all people, that he wants all people to know him. And I don't understand his plan.

And so I get to love everybody, assuming that everybody is eventually going to be in the flock and the fold of God. I have no idea this side of eternity, who's in and who's not, who's elect and who's not. And we'll

get into more of it later because right now in your mind, you're going, "That's not fair and that's not what I deserve." We'll get to what's fair and what you deserve a little bit later.

Now, I will say this: Be careful. Listen, be careful about what your view does to you.

The more you lean into the Arminian side of this conversation, the bigger your will and intention tend to become, and the smaller God becomes in your salvation and the salvation of others. You think you got saved because you were good enough, smart enough, or figured it out. And you think if you could just be good enough, some other people in your life would get saved, too.

And the more that you lean on the Calvinist side of this conversation, especially the extremes, the bigger God tends to become, but sometimes the smaller your passion for unchurched people becomes. And you go, "Well, I'm not going to tell my neighbor about Jesus

because if they're elect, God's going to swoop in and fix it anyway."

No, no, no. You are God's plan A to share the good news of Jesus with everyone around you. That is unmistakable.

So what does it look like for us to understand even in a clearly pictured paradox? You and I live in the tension we discover there. We should have a point of view, but it should never diminish my love for you.

No matter who you are, no matter what you believe, no matter what your story has been or might be, no matter who you are, no matter where you are today, one of the things that is really freeing for me is that I wasn't smart enough to figure out Jesus. That I wasn't good enough to earn it. It was all a gift. And when I share the good news of Jesus with others, it works the same way. The pressure is off. I want to do my best, but it's really up to God with the rest.

It's why Paul says this: "And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling. And my speech and my message was not out of plausible words or wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

See, Paul, he didn't need to do it this way. He had other approaches he could have tapped into. He led with vulnerability because he, look, it wasn't because he had a bad resume, but because he finally realized where his righteousness, his right standing with God for eternity, really came from.

He had checked every religious box. And yet, it took Jesus knocking him to the ground and blinding him to finally see for the very first time.

When we let God be God, it's not our job to determine who's in and who's out. God's timing and purposes will always be a mystery to us. This side of eternity, this isn't an abstract idea for me, by the way. This is deeply personal. I'm guessing for some of you, it is, too.

If you know anything about my story, you know that I grew up with an abusive father. And late in my dad's life, he decided to follow Jesus. And it wasn't because of my skill or my goodness. We had a routine where once a week on my day off, I would take one of our kids and his classmates to the school that they went to, our neighborhood school. I'd walk them there, and my dad, who was across the country, and myself, we would have sort of breakfast together on the phone. I was at this ratty old diner with a rickety old breakfast counter, with some headphones in, and he was back in Ohio.

And I remember just hearing God working in his life as he was recovering from some pretty significant medical procedures. And he

told me about a dream that he had. And in the dream, God showed him that he deserved judgment. It would be pretty easy to make that case in my dad's life, even from human standards. But in the same dream, he saw that Jesus was offering him grace. That he was real. That it was undeserved. And that was the point. He wasn't good enough. I wasn't smart enough. God was more than enough for both of us.

He was able to reach my dad with the hope of heaven after a lifetime of hurting himself and hurting others. And his love has kept me in his love even when life has been difficult, even when challenges have been everywhere. That's how powerful God is. The pressure is off.

Menlo Church, if you don't know Jesus, just seek him and you'll find him. That's a biblical promise. If you're seeking him and you hope you're chosen, trust Jesus and confirm that you are. And if you are wondering if you can lose your faith, the good news is you can't lose what you never found. He's the one who found you, and he's never going to let you go.

Paul puts it this way in the church to Philippi: "And I'm sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). That's some really good news.

It's what we highlighted before as the perseverance of the saints or eternal security. God has always had you and he always will, from before you were born to long after this world.

See, my main frustration in this conversation is wrapped up in a couple of phrases, right? We hear all this and we go, one of the things that we say is this: "That's not fair," right? So, we want something that is fair. And we'll also say something like, "I deserve."

And so we'll ask, "Okay, if I were to compare myself to that classmate, to that sibling, to that coworker, I'm the one that should get the promotion. I'm the one that should get the easier life. I'm the one that

should get a path past this problem." Or we just think like fair should be like we all get the same shot. Fair should be that it's even. It's across the board.

But can I just tell you real quick? We actually don't want what we deserve. We don't want what's fair. And here's why: You may not know this, but we all deserve judgment.

See, we live in a world that is again self-evident that we have a problem. We don't need a self-help book. We don't need a few tips. We need complete and total salvation. All of us. And so we have lived in cosmic rebellion because of the consequences of sin in the human genome, basically from the very beginning of all of human history.

And so because of that, what do you and I deserve? What would be fair for us never to have existed, for you not to have the breath in your lungs today. That's what we deserve. That's what's fair. And again,

right now you're going, "This is exactly what I hope you talk about today."

The thing is, sometimes we'll go, "Okay, so I get it. I want a little bit better than what I deserve." And so then we settle for mercy. Mercy is not receiving the negative consequences of our choices. Some of you, this is the picture of salvation you said yes to.

You said, "Okay, God, you're going to give me a brand new start. Thank you so much. You give me another shot, a starting line that beginning today, I'm going to live for you with everything I have, and I'm not going to mess up."

But then the problem is later today or tomorrow, depending on your level of self-awareness, you go, "God, I need another next shot. And I need another next shot." Because we need more than mercy. We need more than to be saved from the past decisions we've made. We need grace. And grace is the undeserved favor. God giving us his

righteousness in our place. Right? So when we go, "What do I deserve? What's fair?" Not that. As a matter of fact, it's worse than judgment. If God really wanted to, he would be perfectly entitled to revenge, to a vision of vengeance.

He could even be vindictive if he wanted to be because it would be well deserved. He's been watching this for all of human history. So if you want fair, Menlo Church, if you want what you deserve, it's this side of the ledger. Anybody want fair? No.

Now there is a deeper thing that this reveals in us, something so much better. Because in the midst of this, when we genuinely let God have access to the deepest recesses of who we are, here's what we ultimately realize: The God of creation does not need your negotiation.

Now, if as you've been diving into this and you go, "I'm not exactly sure how to work all this out and what do I do?" Man, pray. Pray to

God about clarity. Pray to God for people around you that don't know Jesus yet, that they would be found in him. You're God's plan A.

I also want to let us sit in something for just the next few minutes across all of our campuses. There's a song that came out a few years ago that really impacted me and spoke about this subject: just how big God is, how big his plan is. That we can trust his plan way more than asking him to cosign on our plan. You might be really smart. You're in Menlo Park. You're in Saratoga. You're in Mountain View. You're in San Mateo. You're around the Bay Area. You're watching on vacation. This is incredible. You're brilliant, but you're not as smart as God.

And the scriptures say, "As far as the heavens are from the earth, so far are God's ways from yours and mine." So, these difficult passages, they weren't written so that you and I would sit in fear of whether or not we're in or not. They were inspired by God that we would endure the difficulties of this life and our faith in God with a

greater and greater confidence in the God of our salvation, that he really is in control.

So, in just a second, I'm just going to ask you to sit in the lyrics of this song. Listen to the music at all of our campuses as we remind ourselves of the deep theological paradox, the tension that we discover in our own mortality as we seek to know the immortal and immutable God who saved us, and what that we can't earn it. We didn't deserve it, and we can never pay it back. Would you pray with me?

God, thank you so much. Thank you for the gift of these truths that even our finite minds can only understand a piece of, and we just confess that to you. But God, we pray that there would be a deeper and deeper awareness of the love that you have extended to us. That there would be a deeper and deeper trust in us. That God, we're not here to negotiate with you. We're not asking you to sign on the dotted line to what we want. God, would you even over these next few minutes just pull the fingers back from the fists of control we try to

live our life with? And God, may this week you shape more of the way we think and believe than we try to shape the way you think and believe. It's in Jesus' name. Amen.

Resources

BOOKS:

- *Is God a Moral Monster?* – Paul Copan
[Link](#)
- *How (Not) to Read the Bible: Making Sense of the Anti-women, Anti-science, Pro-violence, Pro-slavery and Other Crazy-Sounding Parts of Scripture* - Dan Kimball
[Link](#)
- *The Drama of Scripture* – Craig Bartholomew & Michael Goheen
[Link](#)
- *Chosen by God* - RC Sproul
[Link](#)
- *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* - DA Carson
[Link](#)

- *Egangelism and the Sovereignty of God* - JI Packer
[Link](#)
 - *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* - Gordon Fee
[Link](#)
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PODCASTS:

- [Ask NT Wright Anything](#)
Offers thoughtful responses to theological questions, including topics like election, gender, and violence.
 - [BibleProject Podcast – “Character of God” series](#)
Breaks down who God is—even when He seems angry or distant.
 - [Undeceptions with John Dickson](#)
Each episode tackles a misunderstood or controversial issue of faith.
 - [Unbelievable Podcast](#)
Does God predetermine everything?
-

WEBSITES:

- [The Center for Hebraic Thought](#)
Academic and pastoral resources on how the Bible thinks, especially for understanding OT laws and ethics.
- [Ruth Haley Barton – Transforming Center](#)
Tools for soul reflection during a series that invites discomfort and

depth.

- [Fuller Seminary's "FULLER studio"](#)

Videos, articles, and lectures from a wide range of scholars engaging modern faith questions.