

Does God's absolute sovereignty make evangelism and prayer pointless?

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- [0 : 00] So let's read John chapter 17, starting at verse 1. When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, Father, the hour has come.
- Glorify your Son, that the Son may glorify you. Since you have given him authority over all flesh to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.
- And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.
- And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world.
- Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you.
- [1 : 08] For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them, and have come to know in truth that I came from you, and they have believed that you sent me.
- I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them.
- And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.
- While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost, except the son of destruction, that the scripture might be fulfilled.
- But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.
- [2 : 24] I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.
- I do not ask for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.
- The glory that you have given me, I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one. I in them, and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me, and loved them, even as you loved me.
- Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

[4 : 11] That's the word of the Lord. Okay. We're eight weeks into a nine-week series, considering how we experience God's sovereignty, God's power, in our salvation.

I just want to recap a little bit before we jump into the question this morning, because I think it's important to remind ourselves that as we've looked at this whole issue of experiencing God's power and salvation, we've been swept away by the language of salvation.

We've seen that the nature and extent of sin leaves a person in a totally hopeless situation before God. But then the language of salvation sweeps in.

God takes the initiative in his love, in his mercy. He initiates our salvation. He initiates everything that's required to bring us back into good relationship with himself.

Very powerful, compelling language. And all of that effort on God's part is received by us as pure grace.

[5 : 17] That's another word of salvation. It's something that we're so totally contrary to what we deserve. And we've been reminded, as we work through what are commonly called the doctrines of grace, we've been reminded that salvation from start to finish is due to God's actions, powerful actions for us and in us.

And we saw last week that God's golden chain of salvation with inseparable links that speaks so much of security and completeness and the fact that God's got us, at no point are we left to our own resources.

That's so lovely, that language, isn't it? So reassuring. In Romans 8 and 29, we saw last week that God, at the start, God determines who will be saved.

Then he acts decisively to save them. Then he guarantees that a saved people will make it all the way home to heaven, where we'll be with Jesus and we'll be like Jesus.

It's just incredible as that language just sweeps over us. Yet, and this is something I find is really incredible, yet incredibly, for many believers, God's golden chain of salvation is not a cause to praise him, to praise him for his grace.

[6 : 46] It's not something they find wonderful assurance in, but in actual fact, for so many Christians, that has been the cause of angry division and separation within Christian communities.

It's actually been the cause of some Christians to doubt God's character and God's goodness. It just seems so counterintuitive to have the language of grace and love and mercy and to end up really thinking that God's not good.

Oof. I think I'm starting to sound like Dave Bott just in the way I said that, didn't I? He's channeling me from on holidays. Okay, so in response to that, we've been addressing some of the common questions posed in response to God's absolute sovereignty and salvation.

And this morning, the question is, as Matt introduced us, does God's absolute sovereignty or power, does that make evangelism and prayer for us as Christians pointless?

Since God has already set his love upon specific individuals, since he's already marked them out for salvation, and since only those ones will be saved, then what is the point of me evangelizing?

[8 : 11] What is the point of me praying for the salvation of people in general or a specific person in particular? And as Matt rightly said, it's a big question.

All these questions we've been dealing with are big questions. Now, I want to push this in four directions. Well, it's not actually four directions. I want to sort of step through this in four steps. There might well be other steps.

I just couldn't think of them. You might come up with a better answer than I've got this morning. But it is what it is, and you can deal with me afterwards. The first step I wanted to take is to say this.

We need to recognize that there is no ultimately satisfying answer in any of these questions about God and God's action and salvation.

We can go so far in philosophical analysis, but inevitably we'll come to a point where we can't go any further, and there'll still be a point we just don't understand.

[9 : 13] And because of that, it's really important to be aware of our presuppositions and assumptions that we might bring to any of these questions regarding God's absolute sovereignty.

Now, here's the point, you see. I think we're victims of our so-called scientific, evidence-based culture. That's what we hear all the time.

And it runs like this. Science really claims, or perhaps it's pseudoscience, science claims that if I cannot understand something fully, if I cannot explain the logic of something, the process of something then, it's probably not real and probably foolish to believe it.

Now, when armed with our assumptions of human logic, such as those, when we go looking for the logic of God and we intersect God saying on the one hand that salvation is his sovereign initiative and action from start to finish, yet on the other hand, God's saying that he commands us to pray and evangelize.

With our human logic, we quickly conclude, or easily conclude, that these two things just don't sit with each other. In fact, we conclude that they've got to be enemies because we can't quite work out how they work together.

[10 : 42] And so we quickly move to the conclusion that they're enemies. They cannot both be true. And from there, we conclude that God cannot be sovereign in salvation, as he claims.

Or, we conclude that God is sovereign, but a monstrous tyrant. Because our understanding of his sovereign action doesn't fit with what we think would be a good action.

Now, the problem with all that is that it actually lies in the face of what we live with practically and constantly at so many points in our life.

At so many points of trying to interact with our universe. The best scientific minds concede that at so many points we observe things in the universe that don't fit our logic, that don't fit our ideas of how things should work, that can't be understood, that can't be explained.

Yet, the reality of them cannot be denied. And so, that creates a tension.

[11 : 59] Where is the tension sourced? The tension is sourced not in what we observe, but in our understanding, our ability to understand and comprehend and articulate in the process of what we observe.

The problem is ours. How much more, then, when it comes to understanding the infinite character and working of our God with our finite brains?

Scientists don't understand, really, how the universe can be both expanding exponentially and also deteriorating. And so, for us, when we come to bring our logic to God and make God fit our logic and our ideas of what's good and consistent and right and how things should work, then, I think it's both foolish and arrogant to conclude that because we cannot understand to our satisfaction and logic how God's absolute sovereignty and human responsibility fit together, it's arrogant and foolish to conclude that, therefore, because we can't understand it, therefore, it can't sit together or it won't sit together.

And that, therefore, if we see these two things and they don't fit together, then, our option is either that we're puppets or that God's not absolutely sovereign.

Now, J.I. Packer, in his book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, and I think that book still was written in the 70s or 80s, but I don't think it's been surpassed. Get a copy of it if you can get a hold of it.

[13 : 46] Actually, this is a moment to say somebody out there has got my copy. Anyway, Packer says this, a God whom we could understand exhaustively and whose revelation of himself confronted us with no mysteries whatsoever would be a God in man's image and, therefore, an imaginary God, not the God of the Bible at all.

The problem's ours where we find these tensions and lack of understanding. So, my friends, since God puts his sovereignty and human responsibility together constantly in the Bible, then we should believe and accept, comma, even though we don't fully understand.

Having said that, we move on to the second point. We can dig into the Bible and there's lots we can understand. And here, the point I want to make is that we should be instructed by the clear emphasis of Scripture.

In other words, when you read the Bible just with an honest mind for comprehension, it will give us a lot to answer this question. And it goes like this.

It appears that Christians have found an issue that Jesus himself had no sense of. And that's why I want to touch us down in John 17.

[15 : 26] Throughout his ministry, Jesus is up front about two things. Firstly, he's up front about God's absolute sovereignty in every step of salvation, every stage of salvation.

We see that right through John's Gospel, particularly. But at the same time, we find Jesus in John 17 praying and urging his disciples to evangelism.

No problem for Jesus at that point. If you look at chapter 17, verses 2 through to 12, I don't have time to touch down in great detail, but you can just check it out on your own this afternoon if you're interested.

In chapter 2 through to 12, sorry, chapter 17, verses 2 through to 12, Jesus is reflecting on his sentness. He's very much aware that he's been sent into the world by his Father to achieve the Father's purposes, eternal purposes in salvation.

To give eternal life to all those, and the language is in John 17, the language of God's sovereignty. He's been sent into the world to give life to all those that the Father has taken out of the world and given to Jesus.

[16 : 53] There's the language of election. And in verses 18 through to 20, Jesus takes another step and the connection is this.

Jesus says, Father, as you have sent me into the world to speak of your glory and your salvation, so I send all my saved people, this elect group.

I then have brought them, or sorry, you've brought them out of the world and I'm sending them back into the world. Why? To speak about Jesus so that others might know Jesus and come into eternal life as they themselves have done.

in other words, evangelism. Now friends, I just want to make this very simple point. Jesus prays for his disciples, for his people, and it's not just his disciples because he prays for those who have not yet become believers.

He's praying right down through the generations as it were. Jesus prays for his people in the context of evangelism and in the context of God's absolute sovereignty and there's not a skerrick of embarrassment or tension.

[18 : 15] Now I realize that doesn't answer all the questions but it normalizes it, doesn't it? Because the same pattern, it's not just in John 17 I find that.

You can actually get a hold of that concordance and look through the whole of the Bible and you'll see this repeatedly. Same pattern across the whole Bible. In Deuteronomy chapter 4 that goes right back to God's people in the wilderness ready to go into the promised land and in Deuteronomy chapter 4 verses 5 through to 8 God makes clear essentially the same point that he wants, he tells his people that he expects them to go before all the nations and make clear to all the nations his sovereign power and loving character and the goodness of God's laws as the means to the good life.

Why does God do that? So that all nations might know him and might have the opportunity to come and bow before him and serve him and worship him.

Isaiah 66 verse 19 and there's many many places between that. Isaiah 66 verse 19 at the other end of the exodus the exile sorry exile I said I should have been exile not exodus the other end of the exile God's intent in that verse is very clearly to send survivors of the exile to the nations for what purpose?

Nations that have not heard of his glory and his character and his works and God's sending he says I intend to send my people to those nations why?

[19 : 59] So that they might know of God's character and God's glory. Evangelism. Again in Luke chapter 24 verses 45 through 47 you remember that just that little cameo with Jesus just before Jesus returns to heaven.

and he's reminding his disciples of two things. Firstly he reminds his disciples that somebody's locked out there you need to open the door from the inside. He reminds his disciples of two things.

Firstly that the Old Testament spoke clearly of him and anticipated his coming and that God's intention had always been secondly through his people to make known repentance and forgiveness of sin in Christ to all nations.

There is no incompatibility in the scripture between God's absolute sovereignty and global sentness of his people to speak of God's glory to make his name known which is really what evangelism is.

And friends I think if we move from there to look historically across the ages of the church that particular emphasis of scripture that sentness in the context of God's absolute sovereignty of God going before them as it were that has been the motivation for countless missionary movements over the generations.

[21 : 48] It's not been a detraction from missionary zeal it's been the motivation to it because God goes ahead of them because God has it even before they get there.

They're not going in to a state of it being left up to themselves and their own efforts and their own cleverness and their own ability to articulate things, their own ability to identify wrong thinking in a person's heart and change their attitudes and desires.

No, they go there because God is sovereign and God will do that. Their job is simply to take the gospel and speak it as God's intention always was for us people. Go and speak of my glory.

And step again into the third point as we're thinking about this. So as we dig down into this, then I would say thirdly, we've got to be really careful as we sort of swim into this big issue not to confuse God's stuff with our stuff.

Think of two sides of one coin. Two sides of one coin are inseparable but different. We'll get ourselves in a tangle if we don't know which side of the coin we're dealing with.

[23 : 13] God's stuff and our stuff. How does that work? Well, let me tell you what God's stuff is. God's stuff is what describes God's character and activity in his world.

In classic theological terms, these are called the secret decrees of God. The secret decrees of God. Now, these are things and they're often the why of God's actions.

These are things which we cannot understand fully at points because we cannot fathom the mind of God and at points because God simply hasn't told us.

They're the secret things of God which you cannot understand but which are nevertheless true because God says they're true. For example, in this golden chain of salvation, we are simply told by God that he in eternity past has elected or set his love upon a specific group of people and determined that they would be saved.

God just makes that statement. But immediately we realize there's so much about that process that we simply do not know and cannot understand.

[24 : 37] but in that God tells us what he does want us to know. He tells us that he does what he wants because he does have sovereign power and nobody can challenge him or limit him.

And he tells us alongside that that his purpose in salvation is to display his grace, mercy and manifold wisdom with a multitude so great that no man can number them to use a picture of revelation.

Being brought from death to life. A multitude so great that deserves judgment and condemnation being pardoned and restored.

That's what God tells us his purpose is in it. And we still can't understand how it works. God wants this great community across the world that will respond to him in praise and worship and obedience.

And we still can't understand how it all works or why God has chosen the way he's chosen. That's God's stuff.

[25 : 57] And dare I say, like as a parent I've said to my children so many times over the years, it's none of your business. What is very clear is what I want you to do.

Don't you worry about the rest of it. That's up to mammon may to sort. Have you said that to your children? There you go, you've answered your own question. The other side of the coin is our stuff.

Words or commands, commands directed clearly to people, describing our character, describing the activity that the Lord intends us to have, and describing our proper response to God.

So, I want you to do this, says the Lord. I want you to do that, says Jesus. Now, here's the point, and this is a really, really important point. Never in scripture that I can find, and if you want to argue with me, please wait to the end of the sermon, don't embarrass me now, but as far as I can see, never in scripture are we asked to respond on the basis of God's stuff, or God's secret decrees.

We are only ever asked to respond on the basis of our stuff, on the basis of God's commands, on the basis of what God tells us and makes clear. God's secret. And Christ commands us to evangelize.

[27 : 27] Matthew 28, verse 19, the Great Commission. Simple, isn't it? The apostles also taught and modeled evangelism.

Again, these passages are listed, so I'm not going to even go to them. You can check them out for yourself later. 1 Corinthians 5, 11 to 21. Paul speaks at length about being entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation.

That is, to go and speak to people, to argue, to persuade, to reason, to draw people, to listen to the truth of the gospel that salvation has found in no one else except Jesus.

His motivation? The compelling love of Jesus. Not election, not predestination, not a theological treatise does he go to these people with.

It goes because of the compelling love of Jesus. That's our stuff. And the task of evangelism, my friends, of being witnesses of salvation in Jesus, is never described as a call to explain the detailed workings of election.

[28 : 41] Never, ever. is a call to explain God's effectual call by which he mysteriously acts within a person, takes the gospel message to hear and mysteriously acts within a person to renew them and give them life.

No. Never in those terms. Paul's ministry of reconciliation, the focus was on sin, the need for repentance, the reality of forgiveness in Christ, a new life.

Salvation is found in no one else but Jesus. That's our stuff. And likewise, Christ commands us to pray.

Many, many verses. 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 17, only one. Pray continually, pray urgently. to command. And again, John 17, Christ modeled that command in his own ministry.

Friends, we may never or we may not understand fully how and why God does it this way. but that's God's business.

[30 : 02] Our business is to get on with the task of what God has called us to and made clean to us. That is, get on with the task of being witnesses, being my witnesses, of telling anyone who will listen of their need for Christ and praying urgently that the Lord will actually open their hearts to hear those words of Christ so they become real and so that person might be swept into the kingdom and enjoy a new life.

And the fourth step then in that is, and in my mind these sort of follow on but maybe not in the presentation but in my mind we take another step and we say, well, we need to remember then that God determines both what will happen and how it will happen.

God determines not only that a specific group called the elect will be saved, he also determines how they will be saved.

He provides the means by which they will be saved. So God sets his love on this group we call the elect before eternity. That's the what or that a group will be saved.

then he determines, provides the means, the how. What does he do? He sends Jesus to redeem. He sends his Holy Spirit to renew. Again, we can push back so far but ultimately we have to say, well, we don't understand why God does it this way.

[31 : 45] But it's clear that he does. And at that point, there's a mix between God's stuff and our stuff.

And at that point, it's so terribly, terribly important to know which one we're dealing with, which one we're addressing. In Romans chapter 10, verse 14, Paul talks there about preaching the gospel.

And he says that our work as Christians is like the work of Messiah. We're drawn into the work of Messiah. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings and good news.

That's the work of Messiah. Preaching or declaring the gospel is the appointed means of working out God's purposes in salvation.

How will they believe unless somebody tells them, says Paul. How does it all fit together? Why does God do it like that? Why does God draw us into his purposes in salvation?

[32 : 57] I'd have to ask some of my colleagues for the answer to that one. I have no idea. I might know one day when I'm in heaven, but I might not. The same point is made in 2 Thessalonians 2, 13 and 14, Acts 18, 1 Corinthians 1, and a plethora of other places across the New Testament.

God has determined that those he intends to save will actually come to salvation in response to what? In response to one of his people actually gossiping the gospel to them.

I mean, imagine that for goodness sake, that here's God's sovereign plan and purpose from all eternity, one eternity to the other eternity, all put in place and somehow or other, for some reason or other, God uses us as a means by which people will hear the gospel and, as it were, trigger that process by which the spirit will take those words and make them real in the heart and mind of the person we speak to.

Phenomenal, isn't it? How can we sort of encapsulate that? That that's what the scripture leads us to.

Sometimes it will require, as Paul says, sometimes it will require reasoning, debating, persuading, using all our God-given abilities and talents to make the gospel message that we want to say to people winsome, compelling.

[34 : 37] Speaking to people who might at first be reluctant to hear. Speaking to people that, from our human logic point of view, is a waste of time to speak to because clearly we can see that they're not suitable for the gospel.

They're too dead in their sin. Friends, rather than election being a reason not to evangelize, it's quite the opposite.

God's sovereignty is the greatest encouragement to persevere in declaring the gospel to our family, friends, and world at large. God's sovereignty is the greatest encouragement to persevere in prayer.

God's sovereignty is the gospel to anybody I can find who will listen to me.

And let God do his stuff. Change people from the inside out. Not my place to decide if he should speak, you know, change that person and not that person or change them all or change none of them.

[35 : 52] I'm to get on with my stuff. Why? Why preach? Why speak the gospel? Why pray?

Well, because it's the means by which God will actually effect the salvation of those he set apart. God's purpose will be achieved. God's purpose will be achieved. And that's guaranteed with the end result that God's cause will triumph.

God's purpose will be achieved and he will be praised and he will be honored as he deserves to be. What's faithfulness in evangelism?

It's actually not seeing people converted, which is what we've sort of pushed to believe these days in modern evangelicalism. That's not evangelism, faithfulness in evangelism. Oh, faithfulness in evangelism is speaking as clearly and truly the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and salvation finding none else.

That's faithfulness in evangelism. A person could do that all their life and not see anybody converted. That would be faithful. Because that's our stuff. And we've got to learn to let God do his stuff.

[36 : 59] as he's promised he would do. And as we see evidence of him doing around us here this morning. And the same applies to prayer.

You look at Ephesians chapter 1. Paul launches into a very, very confident prayer in verses 15 and following for the Ephesians. Now what's the motivation to his prayer? Well, he's just finished rehearsing God's salvation bundle.

He's got his mind full of God's sovereignty and salvation from start to finish. And it's with that he launches into prayer for the believers at Ephesus.

Why? Why does Paul pray in response to that? Because he understands that prayer is not about changing God's mind. Changing God's plan for his people and his world.

If that was the case, then prayer is a waste of time. But Paul prays because he recognizes that prayer is a means of accomplishing what God has really purposed and planned.

[38 : 09] Paul's prayer is asking the Lord to do what he's already purposed to do in their lives. And that's why prayer is worth praying. We're not twisting God's arm.

We're not wrestling blessings out of a God who's reluctant to give blessing. We're asking God to do what he's promised to do. And God loves to hear his children.

It's an act of honor in itself when we say, Lord, we know your character and we're asking you now to do what you've promised to do. And in brackets, we're asking you to do what we know we could never do in this person I'm praying for.

My friends, since it's a gospel message that God will use to bring people to salvation, since God alone can resurrect dead people by a secret inner working of a spirit, since those two things are true, then as a church family, we ought to be noted above all else as being a people of prayer and a people of speaking, a people of sentness.

Great programs operating within our church are terrific. Extending into the community even better. A united and radically countercultural community here is essential, compelling as the world looks at us.

[39 : 49] But nothing replaces the centrality of the words spoken and prayer. They're the means by which God will save his people.

The rest is bling, as it were, on the side. It will make it look more attractive and appealing and compelling. It will make it look authentic. But at the end of the day, the means of people being converted is when we speak the gospel.

We don't have to reinvent the wheel. We don't have to be keeping ahead of the current trends, being seen to be cool, being seen to be novel. We just speak the truth of the gospel and we pray.

Lord, make this word true in the life of this person I've just spoken to. bring them into your kingdom, Lord, as you've brought me into the kingdom through your word. And in the end, you know, it's more important for us as a church family that we're pleading with our Father to make effect of our words as we speak the gospel.

That's more important than it is for us directly to try and persuade any given sinner of their need for Jesus. The second one's not unimportant, but the other one's primary.

[41 : 19] But of course, we do both, knowing that this honors the Lord and will be the means by which our secular family and workmates will be saved. You've got family members not converted like me to break your heart, you long to see them, respond to Jesus.

Do you wonder why, as I do, why four siblings respond to Jesus and the fifth one is hostile? I have no idea how it works.

But I continue to ask the Lord to use his word to make my other brother alive in Christ as he's made me alive in Christ.

I'll let God do his business because only God can do his business in my brother's life. I'll just be content to do my business. Let me pray. Lord, these are perplexing questions for us and questions, Lord, sometimes that we allow to become bigger in our minds than they ought to be.

And sometimes, Lord, we allow tensions to debilitate us or even derail us in a way they should never. Help us, Lord, to both have inquiring minds for your gospel and your Bible, Lord, is sufficient to take on the most robust of inquiries from any of your people.

[42 : 47] And yet, Lord, we also pray you might give us believing hearts so that we might actively move and hold to things we don't fully understand. I pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Thank you very much for listening to me. Thank you.