

# God's sovereignty and salvation

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[ 0 : 01 ] The first reading this morning is taken from the letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians, chapter 1, beginning at verse 1, and this can be found on page 1174 of the Church Bibles.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. 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 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.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight, making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

[ 1 : 38 ] In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things, according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Our second reading continues in Ephesians, as Paul addresses the Christians in Ephesus.

So we're starting to read at verse 1, chapter 2, page 1175. 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.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

[ 3 : 29 ] By grace you have been saved. And raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Well, last week we began this series of talks on God's sovereignty. We saw that God has complete control, and total authority, and yet we also saw that the choices we make in life are real choices, that they have real consequences, and that we are accountable to God for the choices that we make.

Can I say, if you missed last week's talk, it's really important to listen to it online, because actually it provides the foundations for the rest of the series. Now I've put again our definition of sovereignty on the outline, let me read it to you.

[ 4 : 59 ] God exhaustively plans, and meticulously carries out his perfect will, as he alone knows best, regarding all that is in heaven and on earth. And he does so without failure or defect.

In fact, accomplishing his purposes in all creation, from the smallest details to the grand purposes of his plan, for the whole of the created order.

And as I said last week, what we're going to do now for these next three weeks, is we're going to see the enormous implications of that, for salvation today, guidance to making decisions next week, and then suffering and evil the week after.

But before we start this week, I want to give us a tip on how to listen to these talks, because I think they will be stretching. I think this idea of God's sovereignty is stretching, not in an academic way, because of course the Bible is not an academic textbook.

But stretching spiritually, as we have our view of God enlarged, and stretching, I think for many of us emotionally, as we relate that to our lives.

[ 6 : 09 ] So the tip is, be careful about your posture. Okay? At which point everyone sits up straight. But I'm not talking about your physical sitting posture. I'm rather thinking about our posture towards God's words.

Because throughout these talks, we're going to see that God is sovereign, and yet we are responsible, our decisions are real. The temptation, of course, is to move to one of those two extremes.

It's either to focus on God's sovereignty, and so deny human responsibility, or so to focus on human responsibility, that our choices are real, at the expense of God's sovereignty.

And as soon as we do that, then not only do we distort the overall picture of the Bible, we also distort God's character, and we'll end up distorting the Christian life as well.

So, consider your posture. Will we humbly accept what the Bible teaches, and be willing to change our thinking and lives accordingly?

[ 7 : 16 ] So today, God's sovereignty and salvation. Questions such as, if God is in control of everything, does it mean that we don't have to bother telling other people about Jesus?

Or if people are responsible for how they respond to Jesus, does that mean that God isn't sovereign? Can Christians fall away? Or if you're looking on the Christian faith this morning, how do you become a Christian in the first place?

To put it simply, who is responsible for saving people? Is God ultimately responsible for saving people? Or are we responsible?

Well, you'll see on the outline our first heading, we are by nature spiritually dead. We are by nature spiritually dead. We are totally unable to see things spiritually and to recognize the truth about God. Have a look again at Ephesians chapter 2, verses 1 to 3. The Apostle Paul writes, 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 who 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.

[ 8 : 43 ] Notice verse 1, spiritually dead. Notice verse 2, Like everyone else, following the course of this world, the prince of the power of the air, which is a reference to Satan.

Now, of course, that doesn't mean that everyone is caught up in the occult, but rather that we all naturally believe Satan's lies, just like Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. Remember those lies, the temptations they fell for?

God hasn't spoken. God isn't good. There won't be consequences. There's no judgment. You can live just how you like. Jesus said exactly the same thing in John chapter 8, 44.

By the way, you'll see on the outline, I put lots of verses under each heading. Some of them I will be referring to, but not all of them, but they're obviously all there for you to look up later on. So Jesus said exactly the same thing in John chapter 8, verse 44.

You are of your father the devil. In other words, all of us are naturally not on God's side, but on the other side. On the devil's side, it's part of our DNA, if you like.

[ 9 : 48 ] Which means, of course, we are completely unable to save ourselves. John chapter 6, verse 44, Jesus says, no one can come to me unless the father who sent me draws him.

No one can come to me unless the father who sent me draws him. Some of the pictures of the devastating earthquake in Amatrice in Italy two weeks ago were devastating, weren't they?

Absolutely desperate. The effects of the 6.2 magnitude earthquake left the village 80 miles north of Rome completely flattened.

Many were buried as their houses simply collapsed around them. It's amazing, really, that any survived at all. Could they save themselves? No.

They were dug out by their neighbors using shovels in their bare hands, by the emergency services using special equipment. Did they insist on contributing something to their rescue?

[10:50] No. Because they couldn't. just as spiritually speaking none of us can save ourselves or contribute to our salvation.

We are by nature spiritually dead. May I say that if you are here this morning looking on the Christian faith with light of your hair and I want us to see this is the starting point.

Because you see the heart of the Christian message is not try harder, keep the ten commandments, and do your very best. Because of course that none of us can.

It's why back in Ephesians chapter 4 chapter 2 rather verses 4 and 5 the apostle Paul says but God being rich in mercy because of the great love which he had for us even when we were dead in our trespasses made us alive together with Christ.

by grace you have been saved. God has intervened when we could do nothing. Why? Because he is rich in mercy.

[12:03] No other reason at all. We are by nature spiritually dead. Secondly, let's think about sovereignty and election. First of all, God chooses people.

He predestines people. Have a look back to Ephesians 1 verses 4 and 5 speaking of those who follow Jesus. Ephesians 1 verse 4 Even as he that's God shows us in him that's Jesus before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him.

In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will. Jesus Christ does exactly the same thing in John chapter 6 verse 37 All that the Father gives to me will come to me.

In other words Jesus is saying look there's a group of people a huge group of people who from way back before eternity God the Father has given to Jesus who will be his people.

who are they? Well they are those who across history and across nations then come to believe in Jesus Christ for themselves. Notice it is not simply that God simply foreknew who would put their trust in Jesus and on that basis he chose them.

[13:36] You sometimes hear people saying that. Alvin Toffler died a couple of weeks ago you may have come across him in 1970 he wrote a book called Future Shock which sold millions of copies and catapulted him to fame across the world.

He predicted loads of things which back in 1970 might have seen completely impossible. So things like the internet and personal computers cloning a post-industrial world with no more jobs for life information overload the world's changing so fast that people can barely keep up.

Not of course that he got everything right he also predicted underwater cities and disposable wedding dresses. I don't know if anyone has a disposable wedding dress I doubt it. But you see is God just a kind of bigger and better version if you like of Alvin Toffler such that he knows the future perfectly he knows who's going to put their trust in Jesus and therefore on that basis he chooses them.

Is that what is meant by predestination? Sometimes people appeal to Romans chapter 8 verses 29 and 30 which I put there on the outline. For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son in order that he might be the first born 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.

But the thing is that word foreknew doesn't just mean that God knew in advance who would follow Jesus because actually that word foreknew is a relational word.

[15:21] It means that God decided to know. He chose them for relationship to love them and those are the ones he predestines.

simply to speak of God's foreknowledge robs predestination of any real meaning at all. So God chooses he predestines.

Secondly he brings people to new birth because God doesn't simply choose those who will be his he makes it happen. Romans chapter 8 verse 30 those whom he predestined he also called.

1 Peter 1 verse 3 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.

I've witnessed the birth of all three of my children and I can safely and with confidence tell you that none of them were any good at all in the process in terms of being helpful but you see it's why

theologians speak of God's irresistible grace because no one can resist God's call no one can stand against it he is sovereign in other words you see my heart is not the kind of little corner of the universe which is beyond God's control those whom God has predestined he then calls and yet as we saw last week the choices that we make are real choices and real decisions we are not robots in the same breath that Jesus says in John chapter 6 verse 37 all that the father gives me will come to me he goes on to say verse 40 for this is the will of my father that everyone who looks on the son and believes in him should have eternal life so yes it's true that God has chosen from before eternity all those who he will save but it's equally true that Jesus

[ 17 : 39 ] Christ offers himself freely to everyone as their saviour and promises that anyone who puts their trust in him will be saved and both of those things are equally true in other words you see I could tell you how I became a Christian in terms of Christian friends who invited me to a Christian meeting at school in terms of the Christian schoolmaster who ran that meeting in terms of all the questions I was asking that were going around in my head at the time and then in terms of a decision I made I can tell you the month not the date I can tell you the month and the year when I made the decision to follow Jesus or I could tell you how I came to put my trust in Christ in terms of God's calling in terms of his overruling of events in terms of his choosing none of which of course I was aware of at the time when you say does that mean we're not free well we're not free in the sense of being outside of

God's control because no one is free in that sense but we are free in the greatest sense that any creature can be free we're free to make willing choices choices that have real consequences real consequences both now and in eternity indeed says Jesus people can choose not to come to him John chapter 5 verse 40 yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life thirdly sovereignty and perseverance so here's the question you see how am I going to keep going in the Christian life I think the longer I go on in the Christian life and the more aware I am of my own sins so the bigger question it becomes and the answer really is exactly the same as what we've seen already this morning the answer is that God is sovereign and yet we have real choices God is sovereign back to Romans 8 verse 30 on the other side of the outline those whom

God predestined he also called those whom he called he also justified and those whom he justified he also glorified a wonderful statement you see of certainty just like Magnus Magnuson used to say on mastermind I don't know if it's still the kind of strapline of mastermind but it used to be I've started so I will finish yes exactly God predestines he calls that is when we believe in Jesus it's at that point that we are then justified we're forgiven but he also glorifies he gets his people to the new creation notice that is in the present tense because although it's a future event it is nonetheless a certainty just as Jesus says John chapter 6 verse 39 this is the will of him who sent me that I shall lose none of all that he has given me but raise it up at the last day you see the new testament gives us abundant assurance those who have put their trust in Jesus

Christ are safe forever doesn't mean that real Christians don't have doubts or don't sin but they persevere they persevere in the long term because Jesus keeps them but nor does it mean that every profession of Christian faith is genuine there is such a thing as spurious belief just think of the parable of the sower just think of those plants that start well but then over time fizzle out the cares of this world opposition and so on merely beginning the Christian life proves nothing because our choices are real choices and God holds us responsible for the decisions and choices that we make John chapter 8 verse 31 Jesus says if you abide in my words you are truly my disciples you see the mark of spurious discipleship is that we don't hold on to

Jesus words we hear his word we hear the teaching of the Bible but we don't hold on to it we turn away from it in our hearts the truth is that God's sovereignty and human responsibility go hand in hand Philippians chapter 2 verses 12 to 13 the apostle Paul says work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure Paul doesn't say now that you put your trust in Jesus you can just sit back and let go and let God and hand over the reins to God and he'll do everything no he says we're to work out our salvation with fear and trembling but nor does he say God's done his bit he's brought you to the point in your life when you put your trust in Jesus it's now all over to you no he says God is the one who enables us to persevere and transforming our lives and our desires

[ 23 : 00 ] God is sovereign we are responsible we make real choices our actions have real consequences C.H.

Spurgeon the minister at the metropolitan tabernacle at the Elephant and Castles once asked how he could reconcile these two apparently irreconcilable truths and he replied I wouldn't try I never reconcile friends and that is the point we need to grasp God's sovereignty and human responsibility are not enemies or sort of uneasy neighbours they are friends and in the providence of God they work together well three implications for us this morning first of all if you're looking in on the Christian faith if you are genuine in doing so then pray pray that God would open your eyes to understand the message of Jesus and pray that he would draw you to himself but then having prayed don't just kind of sit back and wait for your prayers to be answered because of course you're accountable for the way in which you respond to the message of

Jesus so make sure you're holding on to Jesus teaching taking it in rather than hardening your heart second implication for disciples of Jesus already you can be confident God will keep you he has promised to do that he will do so he is sovereign I think so often in practice our assurance rests simply on whether we've had a good day or bad day or a good week or bad week perhaps we haven't had a quiet time perhaps we're stuck in a particular pattern of sin perhaps we've been grumpy at home or grumpy with colleagues whatever it is and actually we feel like rubbish Christians and so our assurance goes up and down like a rollercoaster like this the whole time and yes we are to persevere we're to work out our salvation with fear and trembling but we are to do so confident that our destiny is completely in God's hands because he is sovereign and he promises that he will get those who have trusted in him to the new creation third implication in terms of our evangelism as we seek to tell others about

Jesus here at Grace Church we're wanting to make disciples of Jesus Christ but here's the question you see how is that ever going to happen how is anyone going to come to the point when they put their trust in Jesus after all we know that Satan blinds the eyes of unbelievers we know that men and women are spiritually dead we see that in Ephesians chapter 2 which means of course that humanly speaking evangelism cannot possibly succeed any more than going to Trafalgar Square and telling one of those magnificent stone lions to come to life can succeed completely impossible Jim Packer in his excellent book evangelism and the sovereignty of God which I'm told will be on the bookstore next week says this were it not for the sovereign grace of God evangelism would be the most futile and useless enterprise the world has ever seen and there would be no more complete waste of time under the sun than to preach the

Christian gospel you see without a strong healthy belief in the sovereignty of God we'll either give up on trying to tell people about Jesus or think to ourselves I'm not clever enough I haven't got the right answers or I haven't got the right personality to engage people in conversation or we'll change and distort the gospel after all in John chapter 8 verse 45 Jesus says to those who won't believe in him but because I tell the truth you do not believe in me well the only alternative surely is to tell untruths isn't it perhaps then people will believe in Jesus if we tell untruths sadly of course that's what many churches do they won't talk about the things that people don't want to hear they won't talk about sin they won't talk about judgment they won't talk about the need to repent so you see what's going to guard us from simply giving up on evangelism looking at the invitation card perhaps to the guest event why doesn't

[ 27 : 46 ] God make himself obvious and think I couldn't possibly invite anyone to that what's going to stop us either from giving up on evangelism or distorting the gospel or the answer God's sovereignty in Acts chapter 13 when the apostle Paul preaches the sermon he proclaims Christ and yes there's opposition but he doesn't give up he doesn't distort the gospel and what are we told well I put the verse there on the outline Acts chapter 13 verse 48 and when the Gentiles heard this they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of God and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed God's sovereignty you see means there will be those who do believe because he has chosen people from before creation to belong to him now that doesn't mean there are necessarily many people whom God has appointed to eternal life in our particular corner of

London there may be there may not be we simply do not know but it does create the absolute certainty that evangelism as a whole across history across nations will be fruitful the result the apostle Paul is tireless confident and expectant in evangelism perhaps you thought yourself if God is sovereign why bother with evangelism won't God save people anyway no it's precisely because he is sovereign that evangelism will be effective if God isn't sovereign you and I well we'll give up straight away won't we or we'll distort the gospel defeated before we start just as people often say don't they if God is sovereign why pray but actually the real truth is if God isn't sovereign why pray

every Tuesday morning I take a bus over London Bridge on my way to St. Botolph's Aldersgate Church and as I see the vast crowds of people every Tuesday every other day of the year streaming over at London Bridge I can find myself as they walk into the city having one of two reactions sometimes I feel defeated I think to myself so many people how will they ever hear about Jesus Christ the task simply seems impossible well that's the response when I forget that God is sovereign or I can feel excited so many people I wonder who God will call and I'm expectant and encouraged to persevere and that is the response when I remember that God is sovereign for of going to hear from me and going to had to have on wherever he he■■ as of him does to his heart do he