

If God is Sovereign in Salvation, Why Bother with Evangelism?

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Preacher: Bob Akroyd

[0 : 00] Well, good evening, everyone. It's a great privilege and pleasure to be with you again on this cold winter's evening, but very warm inside. This evening I've been asked to consider the question, if God is sovereign in salvation, why bother with evangelism?

And I'd like you to consider this question from two standpoints, because you can consider that question from the standpoint of a Christian. Because if we say that God is sovereign, why should I bother with evangelism?

If he is going to bring to himself a people one way or another, come what may, then why should I bother telling other people? Maybe tonight you're not yet a Christian, and you might think, well, if God is sovereign in salvation, why do I need to bother with the gospel?

Why do I need to respond to the gospel? Because if I'm one of God's people, well, he'll do his work. And if I'm not, well, that's just the way it is. So I'd like you to, I don't know your standpoint, but you can answer that question from one of two standpoints.

Either the Christian, do I need to worry about telling other people? Or as someone who's not yet a Christian, well, if it's all fixed anyway, what does it matter how I respond personally?

[1 : 13] But as we begin, I'd like to just, to quote someone. It's always good when you're speaking to quote people who are brighter than you. There's a man called John Owen, and John Owen was a big brain in the 17th century.

Now, you read in the Bible, the book of Hebrews has 13 chapters. Well, John Owen's commentary on Hebrews ran to seven volumes. But what John Owen says about God, I think, is a great reminder for us this evening.

He said, we speak much of God. The truth is we know very little of him. And we know so little of God because it is God thus to be known. So the fact that we have questions that are not easily answered should not discourage us.

Quite the opposite. We should expect questions that don't come easily with answers. Because when we come into the presence of God, we come into the presence of the one who knows everything about everything.

He knows everything about himself. He knows everything about us. He knows everything about the past. He knows everything about the present. He knows everything about the future. And we are finite.

[2 : 22] We're limited. We know a little bit about a little bit. And that little that we know, we don't know completely, and we don't know perfectly. Because we are creatures of the dust, we are creatures of time, we are also affected by sin.

Our minds, our hearts, and our lives, we don't think the way we should think. We don't learn the way we should learn. We don't understand the way we should understand. So the fact that we come in contact with questions like this should not bother us.

Quite the opposite. If you have a faith where every loose knot is tied and where every frayed edge is nice and neat, I would wonder whether that faith connects with the God of the Bible.

Because the God of the Bible is big. He's big in his character. He's big in his nature. He's big in his plan. He's big in his purpose. And we're small. And when we come into the presence of the big God, we should never be surprised that we find ourselves scratching our heads, wondering what it is, how it is, why it is.

Let me quote another big brain. This man was in the 19th century, and he spent much of his life in London. He was called to preach at a church in London. It was a church that was kind of down on

its fortunes.

[3 : 38] It had a great history. But at this particular point, it had about 200 people in its membership. And he was invited to be their preacher for six months. He responded that he would accept that invitation, but only for three months, because he didn't want to be a burden to them.

He had a 37-year ministry. And during that ministry, the membership went from 200 to over 11,000. His name was Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

You might have heard of him. Charles Spurgeon was a preacher of great renown. But Charles Spurgeon was a student of the Bible. You see, he never went to seminary. He never studied formally.

But he had an encyclopedic mind. And he put it this way. He said that God predestines and that man is responsible are two things that few can see.

They are believed to be inconsistent and contradictory, but they are not. It is just the fault of our weak judgment. Two truths cannot be contradictory to each other.

[4 : 40] Two truths cannot be contradictory to each other. If then I find taught in one place that everything is foreordained, that is true. And if I find in another place that man is responsible for all his actions, that is true.

And it is my folly that leads me to imagine that two truths can ever contradict each other. So in answering this question tonight, I'd like to ask you three questions and to consider what those answers might be.

I know it's not good manners to answer a question with a question. So I'm going to try to answer a question by asking three further questions. And the first question is a question we should always ask.

Because what you think is important, what I think is important, what Graham might think, Drew might think, Kat might think, all these things are important. But the question I want to ask first is, what does the Scripture say?

Or if you're familiar with the old version of the Bible, Romans 4, verse 3, what saith the Scripture? Because the Scripture is our sure guide. The Scripture is God's word, God's truth.

[5 : 49] So if God has an answer to the question, that's the answer. So why bother? If God is sovereign, why bother with evangelism? Let me just point you to a text.

We're going to come to the prophet Ezekiel in a moment. We're going to come to the apostle Paul in a moment. But let's go to the source, the king, the head. Because if Jesus had something to say about a subject, we'd be encouraged and wise to hear what he has to say.

Remember, in John's Gospel, he said seven times this phrase, I am. The first time he said it, he said, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Familiar words. But as I told you, you have seen me, and still you do not believe. You see, that's the conflict. People saw. People heard. People witnessed.

They heard the sermons. They witnessed the miracles. They were an audience for the parables. And he says, still you do not believe. He goes on in verse 37 of chapter 6 in John's Gospel.

[6 : 56] All those that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me, I will never drive away. Now, that's one verse. Almost, you know, there's a little comma there in the English.

But Jesus said, all those the Father gives me will come to me. Now, that sounds to me like Jesus is speaking about the sovereignty of God and salvation. It sounds to me that Jesus is speaking there that there is a divine selection.

We might call that election, predestination, foreordination. And you might think, okay, well, Jesus now solves the problem. He says, salvation is all of God.

All that the Father gives will come to me. But then after the comma, we read these words, And whoever comes to me, I will never drive away. And you think, I understand the first half.

I understand the second half. I have difficulty bringing them together. Well, Jesus doesn't have difficulty bringing them together. So if Jesus says it, he means it. And if Jesus says it and means it, it's true.

[7 : 58] It's authoritative. So as we ask that first question, what does the scripture say? What does Jesus say? Jesus said that salvation is completely down to God. And salvation is completely open to all.

How can such a thing be? I don't know. If you came here tonight to see if I could answer that question in 25 minutes, I'd begin by saying, I can't answer how these two truths go together. But I can say that both are true. It'd be strange, wouldn't it? If God were sovereign in creation, and God were sovereign in providence, and that God were somehow sovereign in the future of bringing all things together, but that God were somehow not sovereign or in charge with regard to your salvation or my salvation.

Because really, when we come to salvation, we have to ask, what pronoun do we want to use? Do we want to use the pronoun I? You know, the Frank Sinatra way of salvation. I did it my way. Well, is that a way that we can ever describe as a path to heaven? I did it. I achieved it. I secured it. I passed the test.

[9 : 10] I met the standard. Well, I can't say that. You can't say that. The next question is, well, can we use the pronoun we? We did it.

Jesus, you and me together. We did it. We solved the problem. We put right what was wrong. You and I together. I'll give you the majority of the credit, but we were in this as a partnership. I'd feel very uncomfortable to use we in that sense. So then we come to the next pronoun, he. He did it. God, it's all down to you.

It's all down to Jesus. It's all down to the Holy Spirit. I'm going to give you the credit, and I'm going to say thank you for what you have done, because I couldn't have done it, because the Bible says that we're dead, not just dying, not just in danger of death, but Paul says, I'm afraid you're dead in sins and transgressions.

Dead people have very little capacity. Dead people have very little ability, and dead people cannot make themselves alive. Jesus can. The Holy Spirit can.

[10 : 13] God the Father can, and that's what he does through the gospel. So Jesus goes on to say, after he says, all that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.

For I have come down from heaven not to do my will, but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.

For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For me, everyone, everyone who looks to the Son, everyone who believes in Jesus, whoever comes to Jesus will never be cast away.

How the offer of the gospel and the sovereignty of God fit together, I don't know. But that they do fit together, that I am sure, because Jesus tells me they fit together perfectly.

He sees no need to explain. He sees no need to identify this conflict. So the Bible presents an answer to this question, that God indeed is in charge, and that we are responsible listeners.

[11 : 27] So tonight, if you're not yet a Christian, you hear the gospel message. Everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him has eternal life. Whoever comes to Jesus will never be driven away.

That is an invitation to you that you are responsible for replying to. And if you do not reply, the one person that you cannot blame is God himself. Because God makes that which is crystal clear, saying there is a welcome mat out, there is an offer, there is an invitation, and if you will have Jesus, he is yours for the asking.

So we come to the two passages, and I'll start with the second passage first. So the Apostle Paul is describing here a ministry. He says there's a ministry of reconciliation.

And he says that we, Christians, are ambassadors of that ministry. But as we consider the text, we always have to consider the context.

So as we consider the great imperatives of 2 Corinthians 5, let me just read a few verses from 2 Corinthians 4. Because in 2 Corinthians 4, at the beginning of chapter 4, we read this.

[12 : 38] Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God.

But on the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly, we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.

The God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. They can't see.

We paint pictures that people can't see. We speak words that people can't hear. We preach and plead and exhort people who cannot respond.

And you think, well, why bother? Why paint a picture to somebody who can't see? Why speak words to somebody who can't hear? Why give an invitation to someone who can't respond? The Apostle Paul continues, For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake, for God, who said, let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

[13:55] Why do we do it? Because we know what God has done in us. Our blind eyes now open. Our hard hearts now transformed. Our dead spirits now made alive.

So we can testify that this gospel works. I don't know how it works, but I know that it works. I can't explain how that cross 2,000 years ago, that the perfect Son of God, the Savior of this world, died a death that transforms my eternal destiny.

I can't explain how the Holy Spirit quickens my mind, my heart, and transforms me, but I can testify that he has. So the Apostle Paul has a personal testimony.

The Apostle Paul has a testimony that he reminds the Corinthians of. And then he says, now you and I have a responsibility. He says, we have a responsibility now to bring this message to others. If anyone is in Christ, verse 17 of chapter 5, which we heard just a moment ago, he is a new creation, the old gone, the new has come. All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

[15:09] That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting man's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors as though God were making his appeal through us.

We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. This language is a very unusual combination of language because an ambassador, there's an English term called plenipotentiary. An ambassador has the authority and the power of the one who sends them. So the American ambassador who lives in Grosvenor Square in London has plenipotentiary power to represent the president of the United States in the courts of Great Britain.

And when the ambassador speaks, he speaks with authority, he speaks with dignity, he speaks with honor, he speaks with power because he represents an office or a nation.

The strange juxtaposition here is that we are Christ's ambassadors. We represent the king of kings. We represent the most glorious, the most honorable.

[16:20] But yet we're told that unlike earthly ambassadors, that we are to plead and to beseech, that we are to implore, almost beg people to be reconciled to God.

And you think, but why bother? If we're blind and it takes God to open blind eyes, if we're dead and it takes God to quicken dead spirits, where does the ambassador come in?

And why does it matter what the ambassador says or how the ambassador says it? Well, you see, God not only foreordains the ends, he foreordains the means.

And this is the strangest of things, isn't it? That not only does God send his son into the world, which is remarkable, that he sends his son to live and to die, he then pours out his Holy Spirit so that the dead could be quickened, but then he entrusts this work to you and me.

Why would he do such a thing? We are fragile. We are flawed. We are limited. We so often get it wrong. We so often say the wrong things in the wrong way.

[17:25] And yet he says, I want you to be my ambassadors. You see, God has a way of demonstrating his power through weakness. He has a way of demonstrating his grace through instruments such as us.

So you see, God not only has the end in mind, he has the means to get to his intended end. And that's where you and I come in, that we become responsible to him.

We become responsible to his call on our lives. As Christians, we've responded to the gospel. But as Christians, we respond to this commission, and we go because he tells us to go.

What saith the scripture? The scripture says God is sovereign. And the scripture says we are responsible moral agents, that as we have received, we give. We plead, we beseech, we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

I love that passage in Ezekiel. Because the prophet Ezekiel is a complex book, and there's much that is perplexing, but there's also much that is crystal clear.

[18:31] You see, there are popular proverbs that you'll be hard-pressed to find in the Bible. You know that proverb that God loves those who help themselves? God helps those who help themselves?

You're not going to find that in the Bible because it's contrary to what the Bible teaches. You see, God doesn't help those who help themselves. God helps those who can't help themselves. That's the gospel.

Now, self-help, you know, if you go into the self-help section at Amazon or Morderstons, oh yes, there's a lot of self-help books. But that's not, you won't find the gospel in that selection of books. Now, this proverb that Ezekiel is telling us that God doesn't like is the proverbs that parents eat sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.

Well, you can get the idea is that if you eat sour grapes, your teeth or your, it just causes your mouth to pucker. It's sour. It's not pleasant. But Ezekiel is saying there's a proverb going around Israel.

[19:29] The parents are eating sour grapes and the children are puckering their lips. God says, actually, I don't like that proverb because what that does is it takes away the individual responsibility.

The soul who sins is the one who dies. If the parent sins, the parent will die. If the child sins, the child will die. The connection between sin and death is inextricable. If you don't believe me, read Genesis 1 and 2.

Sin and death. And then when sin comes, death inevitably follows. Genesis 3 and the rest of the story. It's not my material. It's what God says. And the prophet Ezekiel is saying, look, let's stop quoting that proverb.

And he corrects their misunderstanding. And he says, look, it's quite possible that a wicked parent might have a righteous child. It's quite possible that a righteous parent might have a wicked child. Ultimately, the individual will stand accountable before God for their sin or for their righteousness. And you might think, well, that's that then. But Ezekiel tells us that God has a message.

[20:33] And he says that God's message is it's never too late to change your mind. If you find that you're in the category of the wicked, it's never too late to change your mind and repent. It's never too late to change your ways.

It's never too late to turn from God, from your sin towards God. And the passion that we saw in 2 Corinthians 5 is repeated here many years earlier when God says, repent, turn from your offenses, then sin will not be your downfall.

Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anything, declares the sovereign Lord.

Repent and live. What does God do? He places the onus and responsibility on the part of the hearer. Don't tell me about your parents, good or bad. Don't tell me about your environment. Don't tell me about your upbringing. Now you are given the gospel. Repent and live. Fail to repent and die. God places the responsibility now on the hearer squarely.

[21:41] So what does the scripture say? We are responsible. If you're not a Christian here tonight, the gospel comes to you in the name of Jesus Christ, with all power, with all authority, believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

Sadly, the opposite is also true. Do not believe in the Lord Jesus and you won't be saved. You are now responsible for your response to that invitation.

So what does the scripture say? The second question in these last two questions will be much quicker, I promise, is what are we meant to do with what the scripture says? Because this isn't just meant to be a talking shop where you hear one person talk and then you say, I thought that was interesting.

I thought that was unusual. I thought that was compelling. I thought that was nonsense. But if it's God who speaks, he speaks so that we do, that we believe it, we trust it, we receive it, and we then do something with what he has given to us.

The great text, John 3.16, for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. So the gospel message is not beyond the

comprehension of the smallest child, the oldest adult, the highest educated person in this room, and the least educated person in this room.

[23 : 02] John 3.16 is within your grasp because God has made it within your grasp. And another large brain, this time in the 16th century, said this, he has implored the universal term whosoever, both to invite all indiscriminately to partake of life and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers.

Such is also the import of the term world, which he formerly used, for though nothing will be found in the world that is worthy of the favor of God, yet he shows himself to be reconciled to the whole world when he invites all men, without exception, to faith of Christ, which is nothing else than entrance into life.

We often associate John Calvin with election, foreordination, predestination, but you will find no clearer exponent of the free offer of the gospel than John Calvin, that now you have a responsibility to the gospel.

What are we to do with this truth? Well, one thing I want you to do is to share it. How are we to share it? Well, using some old-fashioned language, I want you to share this truth promiscuously. You heard it there. You were told in church to be promiscuous. Let me explain what I mean. In 1619, there was a series of canons, of church declarations, the canons of Dort.

[24 : 24] You can look it up if you like. The fifth article, under the second point of doctrine, namely Christ's death and redemption, puts it this way. This is the old English translation of 1619, roughly when the authorized version was translated.

Furthermore, it is the promise of the gospel that whosoever believes in Christ crucified should not perish but have life everlasting. So that's the guarantee to the respondent.

That whosoever believes in Christ, crucified should not perish but have life everlasting, which promise together with the injunction of repentance and faith, meaning the terms and conditions of the gospel, repent and believe, ought promiscuously and without distinction be declared and published to all men and people to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel.

And the definition of promiscuous here is demonstrating or implying an unselective approach, indiscriminate or casual. You see, the one thing we're not meant to do is we're not meant to think, he is interested, he is suitable, she is likely, I think they might be interested.

No, that has nothing to do with it. What we think of them, what we think of their interest, their level, their knowledge, their understanding, their appreciation means nothing. If the gospel is for all people and we are the people of God, we must do what he tells us to do, like the sower who scatters seed.

[25 : 52] You might think, well, why did you scatter seed on the path that's so wasteful? The sower went forth to sow. That's our responsibility. We sow the good seed. The good seed is the gospel. And we let God do his work.

And what we're told in these great reminders of the faith and these great reminders in the history of God is that when we take seriously that gospel injunction to go, just wait and see what God does.

And wait and see the most unusual and unlikely of people. Because if it's down to your thinking, you're going to make the wrong selection. You're going to withhold the gospel from people who respond and you're going to give the gospel to people who aren't interested.

That's a huge responsibility to have, whereas God says, don't worry about that. You leave that to me. You go and tell everyone. Man, woman, child, from the east, from the north, from the south, from the west, the educated, the illiterate, the rich, the poor, the interested, the disinterested, the hostile, whoever.

Scatter this message and scatter it promiscuously. And if you're ever given the privilege of public speaking, I want you to remember the injunction of a man called Thomas Chalmers.

[27 : 04] Thomas Chalmers was a key figure in the early 19th century. And Thomas Chalmers had a criticism of his evangelical brethren. He said that as far as he saw, the majority of evangelical ministers did not know how to lay down the gospel so as a man of plain and ordinary understanding should know how to take it up again.

We make the gospel difficult. We make the gospel complicated. We make the gospel confusing. Jesus doesn't do that. The apostle Paul doesn't do that.

The prophet Ezekiel doesn't do that. The gospel message at point of offer should be simple. Believe in the Lord Jesus. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.

How this happens, how God can take this message and transform the human heart, that has nothing to do with you. It has everything to do with him. But in terms of the terms and conditions, believe in Jesus and you'll be saved.

Trust in him. Repent and believe. That's the terms and conditions. The third question I want to leave with you. Well, first of all, what does the scripture say? What are we meant to do with what the scripture says?

[28 : 20] And what difference does it make anyway? What difference does words written on a page 2,000, 3,000 years ago, what difference does that make?

Well, it makes all the difference in the world. The gospel of Jesus Christ makes all the difference. It's a difference between life and death. It's a difference between hope and despair. It's a difference between eternal life in heaven and eternal condemnation in hell.

And I'm going to leave the final words with my friend John Calvin. He wrote a short preface to an edition of the New Testament back in the 16th century. And he says this. He says, Without the gospel, everything is useless and vain.

Without the gospel, we are not Christians. Without the gospel, all riches is poverty, all wisdom folly before God. Strength is weakness. And all the justice of man is under the condemnation of God. But by the knowledge of the gospel, we are made children of God, brothers of Jesus Christ, fellow townsmen with the saints, citizens of the kingdom of heaven, heirs of God with Jesus Christ, by whom the poor are made rich, the weak, strong, the fools, wise, the sinner justified, the desolate comforted, the doubting sure, and slaves free.

[29 : 38] So why bother? God's in charge. Why bother? Well, he tells us to bother. He tells us that it matters to him. People matter to him. The eternal destiny of people matter to him.

And if they matter to him, he should matter to us. And if we have experienced this good gift, we should share this good gift with others. We can leave for ordination, predestination, election, God's sovereignty with God.

But when it comes to our responsibility, when he commands, he authorizes, he equips, and he enables. And when preachers and pastors and Christians take seriously their responsibility, just watch out.

Watch out what God can do. It's interesting. I've been a minister now for 20 years. And it seems strange to me, but I can tell you that this is true. That those ministers of the gospel that take seriously the Great Commission, those are the ministers, those are the pastors, those are the preachers that God tends to bless with conversions.

They seem to take his word seriously. They seem to take the gospel seriously. They seem to take the Great Commission seriously. And when we take those great injunctions seriously, God is pleased to use weak instruments such as we are to accomplish his strong purposes.

[30 : 59] Why bother? Jesus bothered. Jesus bothered for our salvation. He bothered so much, he came into this world to live a perfect life, to die a sacrificial death, to be raised triumphant from the grave.

Why bother? He breathed life into dead bodies. He gives eternal life. And he wants us in turn to share these good gifts with others. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for each one of us gathered here today.

And I pray that if there are any who are not yet following, believing, or trusting, that you might open eyes that are blind, that you might unlock ears that are deaf, and that you might transform hearts that are dead.

And for those of us who are believing and trusting and following, that we might continue to trust, believe, and follow, and that we might see that in our limited ways, that we might see in our own limited sphere, that we might recognize with our own limited gifts, that we have been entrusted with this great message.

We are treasures. We have this treasure in jars of clay, that we are to commend the Lord Jesus in word and in action. And all these things we pray now in his name, so that he might have the praise, he might have the honor, he might have the glory, because he deserves all the credit.

[32 : 14] In Jesus we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.