

# Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God

Various

May 20, 2018

## **Introduction:**

Last week I had the opportunity to preach on one of the most wonderful passages of Scripture, Romans 8:29-30, which lays out for us what I called the “salvation train” where everyone God foreknew, he also predestined, called, justified, and glorified. But it seems that message raised a question for a number of you about how the sovereignty of God relates to the task of evangelism. The question, to put it simply is this: if God is the one who chooses who he will save, then why do evangelism? Does God’s sovereignty then undercut our evangelistic efforts if God has already determined who he will save?

That’s a common question that comes up when talking about election and predestination and a perfectly understandable one. I don’t fault anyone for asking it. In fact, I’m glad you are wrestling with it because it means you’re thinking about what Scripture teaches and trying to apply it to your life. That’s a good thing and I want to always encourage you to think hard about God’s Word, especially when it challenges you or make you think more carefully about how you live for him.

So this morning, we’re going to take a short break from Romans and address this concern both because it was raised by implication in last week’s passage and because it will most certainly come up again once we get to Romans 9, because Paul’s going to teach on God’s sovereign choice in salvation there in a very clear and pointed way. You might say this sermon is a remedy for what ailed you from last week and a clearing of the path ahead for what is to come in Romans 9. I wouldn’t want this objection to sour you to what Paul has to teach us in the next chapter about God’s sovereignty in regard to salvation so I hope today I can give you some understanding and peace of mind when it comes to this question.

Now by way of a long introduction, I want to help you see that the answer to the question of why should we do evangelism if God has already determined who he will save is likely one you already have an answer to and may not even know it. So to begin with I want to help draw out that answer for you by having you consider what it is you already believe.

So let’s begin with the sovereignty of God. I will assume all of you here believe God is sovereign, and what I mean by that is God is in complete control over all things. This is a basic doctrine of God that Christians everywhere would affirm. For example, I trust that you believe God knows the number of hairs on your head and the number of days of your life. He knows all the things that have happened to you and will happen to you: nothing is a surprise to God. And more than he knows what will happen to you, he’s in control of it; he’s the one who is bringing to pass every situation we face. God is more than just reading the book that is your life: he’s the author of it. For example, I’ve read *The Lord of the Rings* and I know what’s going to happen in each chapter because I’ve read the books before, but I didn’t determine what was going to happen. The author, J. R. R. Tolkien, did that. He determined the events that were experienced by Frodo and Sam and everyone else in the novel because he wrote it. So God is more like the author of the book of our lives than a

mere reader: he determines what will happen to each of us. Furthermore, he uses what happens to each of us for his own purposes. Like we learned a couple of weeks ago, God works all things for good for those who love him in Romans 8:28. That's an affirmation of God's sovereign control of every aspect of our lives.

It's safe to say then that each and everyone of us would affirm God's sovereign control over all things, from what happens to nations to what happens in our individual lives, all the way down to something we would view as random like rolling dice or drawing lots, that even that is under the complete control of God's sovereign hand. That's theology 101 and I can safely assume all of you would affirm the sovereignty of God over all things.

So given that all of you here would affirm the sovereignty of God, here's the question I want to pose to you. Why then, if God is sovereign, do you pray? Why do you still pray? Now give that some thought for a moment. Why do you pray if at the same time you believe God is sovereign over all things? Let me make this a little more pointed so you can see what I'm getting at. If you're applying for a job you hope to get, why pray about getting the job if God already knows whether you'll be hired or not? If God has determined that you won't get the job, what does it matter if you pray about it or not; you're not going to get it anyway. Or lets say you've been diagnosed with cancer or another life-threatening disease. Undoubtedly, you'll pray for healing and remission. But if God knows all the days of your life and knows that you will die from cancer, why pray about it? Why pray for healing if God has already determined how the cancer will turn out? Or even more broadly, if God has determined that the number of years you will live is to the age of 90, then why put on seat belts? Or eat healthy? Or exercise? If God has already determined how long I am going to live, what does it matter what I do because no matter what, if God has sovereignty decided that I will live to be 90, then I will live to 90 regardless of what unsafe or unhealthy things I do.

Now I know you guys pray. Some of you here pray about getting a job. Some of you pray about loved ones with cancer. You pray about surgeries and jobs and relationships and travel safety and all kinds of things while at the same time you believe God has complete control over all those things. So why do you still pray? How you answer that question is the same answer you need to apply to the question of why we should do evangelism if God is sovereign over who will respond to it. If God's sovereignty isn't a hinderance to your prayers for those things, then it shouldn't be a hinderance to doing evangelism.

So why do you still pray? I think there are a few answers we could give but the one that I think gets to the heart of the issue is that while God is indeed sovereign over all things, we do not know how God has determined to work things out and so we pray because from our end of things as finite creature, we don't know God's hidden plans. Yes, God may have determined that I will not get hired for that job, but I don't know that, so I pray and ask God to open that door for me. God may have determined this cancer is what will bring about my death, but I don't know that, so I pray and ask him to heal me. God's sovereignty does not paralyze us into a fatalistic indifference when it comes to prayer because even though we recognize he's in total control of all things and knows all the plans he has for us, we don't possess that knowledge. We don't have all the details laid out for us, so we pray.

Well, the same thing should hold true for evangelism. Apply what you do with prayer to what you do with evangelism. God is sovereign over who he will save, but we don't know who those people are, and so we proclaim the gospel to everyone because we don't have inside knowledge of what God will do in regards to any individual. If God's sovereignty doesn't prevent you from praying, it shouldn't then prevent you from evangelizing.

That's the big principle I want to hold before you that I think has the most power to help you answer the question of why do evangelism if God has determined who he will save. You already possess the answer because you still pray while at the same time you affirm God knows everything that will happen to us. So I want to you to apply the same thinking to evangelism as you do to prayer when it comes to how it relates to God's sovereignty. But there's more I want to say beyond this that I think can be helpful to you as we wrestle with this question. To that end, I need to say I'm greatly indebted to the late J. I. Packer who wrote a fantastic book dealing with the issue we are addressing this morning. The following points are lifted directly from his book entitled *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* and therefore I must give credit to him for structuring this sermon as I have.

So moving on now after our very long introduction, I have two points I want to make to further deal with this question followed by a number of sub-points that I think can further help us understand how God's sovereignty relates to evangelism without it negating or undercutting our need to proclaim the gospel to the lost. So the first point is this...

### **1. The sovereignty of God in salvation does not affect anything about the nature and duty of evangelism.**

The thing we need to understand here is that God's secret decree of who he has chosen to save does not change his revealed will that we proclaim the gospel to all people. We're to live according to his commands, not by our guesses of his plans. This principle is laid out for us in Deut. 29:29 where it says, "*The secret things belong to the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong to us... that we may do all the words of this law.*" Those who are chosen by God is a secret thing that God has not revealed to us and has no bearing whatsoever on our obedience to the Great Commission. Certainly the apostle Paul didn't allow the doctrine of election to hinder him. Throughout his letters Paul clearly and repeatedly affirms God's sovereign choice in salvation and was at the same time the greatest missionary the world has ever known. Paul boldly proclaimed the gospel while simultaneously recognizing that no one would believe his message unless God had first predestined them to salvation. Paul knew the means by which God was to accomplish the salvation of the elect was through obedience to God's revealed command to go into all the world and proclaim the good news of Christ crucified. So Paul recognized the secret things of God was not a hinderance to obedience to the clearly revealed will of God to go and evangelize and so it shouldn't be for us either.

So then I want to affirm that we must do evangelism if for no other reason than God has appointed this task to us. Nowhere in Scripture do we find anyone dismissing God's commands because, "Well, whatever will be, will be." We're to proclaim the gospel not in response to our guesses of his secret will but in obedience to his revealed will.

Therefore, allow me to make four sub-points connect to this and the first is this...

**a. The sovereignty of God does not affect the necessity of evangelism.**

The fact that God chooses who he will save doesn't change the fact that the means he uses to bring that about is through evangelism. While there are rare instances where God may directly call someone to himself apart from preaching (such as Jesus did to Paul on the road to Damascus), the normal means by which God calls men to himself is through the proclamation of the gospel.

Thus Paul, the one who insisted upon God's sovereign choice as the only basis by which men are saved in Romans 9 says this in Romans 10, *"For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?"* The way God brings about the salvation of those he foreknew and predestined is by the preaching of the gospel through us. Evangelism is the divinely appointed means by which he accomplishes his divinely appointed ends and he invites us to be part of the process. Yes, true, he doesn't need us, but in his kind wisdom God has given us a role to play in the salvation of men: he has appointed us to tell others about the gospel and through us, he uses our words as the means to bring about the ends that he has chosen to accomplish in eternity past.

So evangelism is necessary because it is how God accomplishes his purposes. He has determined the ends and the means by which men will be saved and he calls us to partner with him in the process. Second point...

**b. The sovereignty of God does not affect the urgency of evangelism.**

Regardless of how we understand election, the stark reality of the situation is that those without Christ are going to hell and are in urgent need to hear the message of the gospel. They are in grave danger and we need to seek to rescue them by telling them of the Savior who alone can redeem them from their sins.

Under no circumstances should our efforts be hindered by our belief in God's sovereignty. Imagine you woke up in the middle of the night and saw outside your window that your neighbor's house was on fire. Realizing your neighbors might still be asleep and unaware of the danger, would you then conclude, "This may very well be God's will for them to die tonight, so since it doesn't matter what I do since God has already decided their fate, I'll go back to bed." Admittedly it may be that this is your neighbor's last night on earth, but you wouldn't let that possibility stop you from running over and trying to get his family out. There would be a dire urgency to do whatever you could to rescue his family from the flames, even if God had determined to take your neighbor's life.

See, we're called to love our neighbor, and not just fellow believers, but all people. And what is more loving than to try to rescue them from death? We don't know

who is elect or who is not, but we do know that unless sinners repent of their sins, they will face God's wrath. So since God's means by which he brings about his sovereign choice to save some is through the proclamation of the gospel, we must go with the urgency we would feel if our neighbor's house was on fire. People are in desperate need to be told of Christ, and so we must be diligent to go and do so because that is the only way they will be saved.

Furthermore, the next sub-point is this...

**c. The sovereignty of God does not affect the genuineness of the gospel call.**

Sometimes people will conclude that God's electing grace in salvation diminishes the genuineness of the gospel call. They'll claim that a gospel invitation cannot be sincere if God already knows for certain that some will not respond. But an invitation can be genuine even if the person making it knows that the invitation will be rejected by most and only accepted by a few.

You might remember that during the announcements I invited you all to come to Savannah's graduation party at our house this afternoon. That's a real invitation. I am genuinely inviting any of you who want to come over to our place in a few hours and celebrate with us. But I also know that not all of you will come. Some of you have other plans already. Some of you maybe don't know Savannah at all so you don't feel that you should come. Perhaps some of you don't like me very much after these sermons about God's sovereignty and you would rather not spend any more time with Pastor Rob today than you already have. But just because I know not all of you will come doesn't mean my invitation to you wasn't genuine.

In fact, let's say all of you actually hate Savannah. You all think she's a terrible, vile teenager and you can't stand to be in her presence and wouldn't for the life of you want to spend any time with her, much less waste part of your Sunday afternoon by attending her graduation open house. So would that make my invitation any less genuine? No, of course not. It's still a real invitation. If you want to come, you may come, but if you don't want to, you won't. Your willingness or unwillingness does nothing whatsoever to the genuineness of the invitation.

So it is with the gospel. Unbelievers don't want to respond to the gospel because they hate God. They love the darkness rather than the light. They won't come to Christ because they don't want to. But their unwillingness doesn't alter the fact that the invitation is real. Jesus says, "Whoever believes in me will have eternal life." If you will believe Christ will grant you forgiveness of sin; even though nobody will of their own volition do so because they're spiritually dead and their wills are enslaved to sin, but that doesn't make the invitation false. The gospel we call people to in evangelism is a genuine call to salvation even if those who we proclaim it to are unwilling in their hardness of heart to respond favorably to it.

Moving on, the fourth subpoint I want us to consider is this...

**d. The sovereignty of God does not affect the responsibility of the sinner to respond to the gospel.**

People are condemned because they have rejected Christ. They're responsible for their unbelief. God didn't force it upon them. There aren't people who really, really want to come to faith in Christ but are prevented from doing so because God is forcing them to reject him against their will. An unbeliever is offered the promises of Christ in the gospel and he rejects it because he does not want to believe it. His heart loves sins and hates God and therefore he cannot believe because he will not believe. The fault is in him, not God, for his unbelief.

But when it comes to salvation, the only reason anyone believes is because God changes his heart so that he will believe. In election, God eventually changes the heart of a person so that instead of hating God, they begin to love him and delight in him and consequently believe in him. Thus salvation is totally God's doing and condemnation is totally our responsibility. If God wouldn't have interfered in my life and caused me to be born again, I would never have believed. But my unbelief was my own: it is what I freely choose in accordance with the wicked desires of my sinful heart. Thus a sinner is responsible for his rejection of the gospel because it comes from his own desires; he cannot blame God for it because he wasn't one of the elect. He chose what he wanted - to reject Christ - and will be held responsible for what he willfully chose to do in accordance with his own desires.

Now those four sub-points are the negative side of the coin in terms of what the sovereignty of God does not affect in terms of evangelism. But I want to turn briefly to the positive side of the coin now by talking about three things God's sovereignty should do for us in our evangelistic efforts. So our second major point this morning is this...

**2. The sovereignty of God in salvation gives us our only hope of success in evangelism.**

Allow me to quote J. I. Packer at this point, "Some fear that belief in the sovereign grace of God leads to the conclusion that evangelism is pointless, since God will save his elect anyway, whether they hear the gospel or not... But [I must point out] the truth is just the opposite. So far from making evangelism pointless, the sovereignty of God in grace is the one thing that prevents evangelism from being pointless. For it creates the possibility - indeed, the certainty - that evangelism will be fruitful. Apart from it, there is not even a possibility of evangelism being fruitful. Were it not for the sovereign grace of God, evangelism would be the most futile and useless enterprise that the world has ever seen, and there would be no more complete waste of time under the sun than to preach the Christian gospel." (Packer 106)

Why is that? Because fallen man is totally unable to grasp spiritual truth. There are numerous verses I could quote from Scripture to demonstrate this but in the interests of time, let me call your attention to what Paul says about it in 1 Cor. 2:14. He says this, "*The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually*

*discerned.*” The lost person cannot respond to the gospel because he’s unable to do so. It is foolishness to him. In his spiritual deadness and enslavement to Satan, he cannot in any way free himself from the shackles of sin.

Thus, allow me to quote Packer once again, “What does this mean for evangelism? It means, quite simply, that evangelism... cannot possibly succeed. However clear... we may be in presenting the gospel, we have no hope of convincing or converting anyone. Can you or I by our earnest talking break the power of Satan over a man’s life? No. Can you or I give life to the spiritually dead? No. Can we hope to convince sinners of the truth of the gospel by patient explanation? No. Can we hope to move men to obey the gospel by any words of entreaty that we may utter? No. Our approach to evangelism is not realistic till we have faced this shattering fact, and let it make its proper impact on us.” (Packer 108)

Thus unless God has sovereignly chosen to save people and then works through our preaching to cause their spiritually blind eyes to see and deaf hears to hear, all our efforts will be in vain. But if God does overcome our sinful, helpless estate through the power of the Holy Spirit, then we can be assured of success because God will see to it that all whom he has chosen will respond to the gospel in faith.

So allow me to make three sub points that deal with this positive side of the coin of how God’s sovereignty helps to encourage us in the task of evangelism. First...

#### **a. It should make us bold in evangelism**

We can be bold in evangelism because we know our task is to simply to proclaim the gospel clearly and faithfully, but the results are up to God. We don’t need to fear that maybe we won’t answer a question correctly or we won’t be convincing enough because the responsibility to convince someone to believe in Christ is not on our shoulders. God is the one who opens hearts to believe, not us, so I can be bold to proclaim the gospel and entrust God with the results.

Furthermore, God’s sovereignty means we can be bold in evangelism because we know that God guarantees its success. If it all up to me, then I may fail because of some deficiency on my part or because those whom I’m speaking to have hearts of stone that adamantly refuse to believe. But if I know God is sovereign and he can break through any resistance because he has chosen to save some, then I can confidently go forward in the task of evangelism even if I meet with resistance.

Consider Paul’s experience in Acts 18. Paul came to Corinth to preach the gospel there but met with stiff opposition and persecution. This was deeply disheartening to Paul, as it would have been to any of us, but listen to what God said to a troubled and discouraged Paul, *“And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.’ And [so Paul] stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.”*

God encouraged Paul to remain and be bold because God said, *“I have many in this city who are my people.”* God’s chosen people were there and Paul was the means by which those who were predestined by God were to hear the gospel, so Paul stayed because of God’s sovereignty in election, not in spite of it. Paul didn’t think, “Well, God will save then whether I’m here or not, so I’m outta here!” No, he was emboldened to stay because he knew his efforts would be rewarded because God had those whom he had chosen there. Paul didn’t know who they were, but he knew God would see to it they would respond in faith to his preaching and so instead of leaving and thinking his efforts in Corinth were futile, he remained and saw God call people to faith in Christ through his ministry.

But that then brings us to another important aspect of evangelism and that is...

**b. It should make us patient in evangelism**

The knowledge that God is sovereign over salvation should keep us from becoming discouraged when our evangelistic efforts don’t meet with an immediate response. God saves people in his own time and we in our fast-food culture need to realize that just because we don’t get an immediate profession of faith doesn’t mean we never will. God’s timing is not ours. Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half proclaiming the gospel because not every one of God’s elect responded in faith the first time they heard Paul preach.

I really like what J. I Packer says at this point and so I must quote him at length once again. “The truth is that the work of evangelizing... is a work in which quick results are not promised; it is a work, therefore, in which the non-appearance of quick results is no sign of failure; but it is a work in which we cannot hope for success unless we are prepared to persevere with people. The idea that a single evangelistic sermon, or a single serious conversation, ought to suffice for the conversion of anyone who is ever going to be converted is really silly. If you see someone whom you meet come to faith through a single such sermon or talk, you will normally find that his heart was already well prepared by a good deal of Christian teaching and exercise of spirit prior to your meeting with him... If, on the other hand, you meet a person who is not thus prepared, a person who as yet has no conviction of the truth of the gospel and perhaps no idea, or even a false idea, of what the gospel actually is, it is worse than useless to try and stampede him into a snap ‘decision’. You may be able to bully him into a psychological crisis of some sort, but that will not be saving faith, and will do him no good. What you have to do is to take time with him, to make friends with him, to get alongside him, to find out where he is in terms of spiritual understanding, and to start dealing with him at that point. You have to explain the gospel to him, and be sure that he understands it and is convinced of its truth, before you start pressing him to an active response... At each stage you have to be willing to go along with him at God’s speed, which may seem to you a strangely slow speed. But that is God’s business, not yours. Your business is simply to keep pace with what God is doing in his life.” (Packer 120-121)

The final thing I need to say circles us back around to what I talked about at the beginning of the message and that concerns prayer. So our final point is this...

### **c. It should make us prayerful in evangelism**

The knowledge that God is sovereign in grace means we ought to be prayerful. If God is the only one who possesses the power to bring the spiritually dead to life through the preaching of the gospel, then we need to be praying that God does for them what we and they cannot do for themselves. You must understand again that just because God is sovereign in saving sinners doesn't make prayer any more needless than it does because God is sovereign over the affairs of our lives, be it sickness or job opportunities or travel mercies. We don't know what God's secret plans are, but we do know that if God doesn't cause a person to be born again, they will remain spiritually dead and will never respond to the gospel. So since it all depends on God's sovereign grace, it is fitting we come humbly in prayer and ask him to do what only he can do in the lives of those we're trying to reach.

The apostle Paul asked for prayer in just this regard in 2 Thess. 3:1. He said, *"Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the Word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored..."* Paul knew his missionary work needed to be undergirded by prayer. He didn't dismiss prayer as unnecessary because God was going to save whoever he was going to save regardless of what Paul did. No, the sovereignty of God drove Paul to pray in advance of his preaching of the gospel and so it should for us. We must be prayerful in evangelism because God is the only one who possess the power to bring about lasting fruit from our efforts.

## **Conclusion**

With that then, I'm hopeful I have adequately answered your concerns and questions. As always, I would encourage you to come to me with your concerns because as your pastor, I want to help you understand God's Word better. If I've been unclear at any point in my preaching or teaching, please don't hesitate to allow me the opportunity to help you wrestle with whatever it is that's troubling you. I don't want to you be confused or angered by the sovereign grace of God in salvation. It is for the apostle Paul, for me, and for many others, a joyful delight to know that salvation is all by grace. Yes, admittedly, it raises questions, and Paul will be addressing some of those directly when we get to Romans 9, but for now I hope I have helped you see why God's sovereignty doesn't at all undermine the need for evangelism but actually gives us confidence and boldness that our efforts at proclaiming the gospel will be met with success because God will see to it that everyone he has chosen will be saved and he accomplishes those ends by the means of people like you and me faithfully obeying the Great Commission.

Please join me now in prayer as we close our time together. Let's pray.

**This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2018.**