

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Distinguishing things that differ: God's sovereignty and our responsibility

Have you heard about the scientist who lived during the early days of astronomy? He was given a beautiful telescope in a decorative case. However, not knowing what to do with it, he used it as a stick with which to beat his donkey. It was not until one of his students took it out of the case and set it up that he was able to see for himself the glories of the heavens. Before we start our look at the sovereignty of God and man's responsibility, as we conclude our series of distinguishing things that differ, I feel that too often in history, Christians have behaved like that scientist. Becoming unbalanced, believers have taken one scripture or another to beat those who hold a different view, rather than using all to lead to a deeper appreciation of the glory of God. This morning, if you are hoping for a clear proof of why God is wholly sovereign so that you can refute those who believe in the freewill of man, then you will be disappointed. If you are looking for a clear presentation of the biblical truth behind the freewill of man at the expense of the election of God, then you will likewise be frustrated. How could 20 minutes early on a Sunday morning ever bring closure to an issue that has caused such division and hostility between Christians. However, I would hope that by looking at some of the scriptures surrounding our subject, we would all be led to a deeper appreciation of the overwhelming majesty and greatness of our God, leading to a fuller sense of worship.

Before starting to look at specific Bible verses, it is maybe right to make three general points. Firstly, not all are called to worry about such issues, nor is it necessary, to enjoy Him. I love climbing up mountains to enjoy the view and appreciate the Creator. My daughter doesn't share my love of climbing, and yet she can equally appreciate the glory of the Creator in the valley. Her perspective is just different. If you are glad that you are saved, and have never considered the paradoxes involved in this morning's subject, then that is fine. It takes a certain mind-set that wants to probe into these things.

Secondly, whilst it may be a slight exaggeration to say that no truth of importance can be confined to a single proof text, there is a huge danger in trying to base my belief upon a single verse. The Bible is not a scientific textbook, stating truths in neatly defined maxims. It is a single unity that reveals the person and nature of God. We are in great danger of not presenting the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth when we consider just one verse here or there, rather than the whole of the Bible. I know it is nice to be able to just give a single reference to prove a point, but is not necessarily helpful. This is particularly true of this morning's subject.

Thirdly, a word of explanation. Theologians often speak about Calvinism and Arminianism representing those who believe in the unconditional sovereignty of God on the one hand or the unrestricted free will of man to choose on the other. We sometimes ascribe to people things that they never actually would have taught, but allowing for that, Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) taught that, whilst the grace of God is required for our salvation, it is not decisive in bringing about personal salvation. Human decision is what is decisive, and it is our choice that determines whether we are saved or lost. In view of this, it is not possible to speak about eternal salvation, as a believer may choose no longer to believe. John Calvin (1509-1564) was a French reformer who developed the theology of unconditional election, which in its extreme form led to teaching that God alone was responsible for the salvation of an individual, so only those whom God saved came to faith in Him. To say that those who hold to only one of these views have engaged in unedifying argument would be one of history's greatest understatements. As in all things, we need to look at what the Bible says and hold to that alone. I make no apology for filling much of our time this morning by reading directly from the Bible, and only making a little comment, for if I believe what the Bible says, all of it, even if I do not understand it, then I will not go far wrong.

- *"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day ... And He said, 'Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father'",* John 6:44, 65.
- *"But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand",* John 10:26-29.

- *“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified”, Romans 8:29-30.*
- *“What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.’ So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.’ Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. ‘You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honour and another for dishonour? ‘What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?’”, Romans 9:14-24.*
- *“Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will”, Ephesians 1:4 -5.*
- *“But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14.*

By looking at these verses I have to come to the wonderful conclusion that God has chosen me for blessing which I come into via faith, which is His gift to me. The verses in Romans show that God is not unjust in this, whilst the verses in Ephesians show that this choosing took place before the creation, and so must be completely independent of my actions. If nothing else this morning, then just revel in the wonderful love and grace that God has, in that for His own good pleasure He decided to lavish upon those of us who are saved His love and His blessing.

But there are other verses we need to read before we try to draw them to a conclusion:

- *“Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”, 1 Timothy 2:1-4.*
- *“But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance”, 2 Peter 3:8-9.*
- *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”, John 3:16.*
- *“‘Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?’ says the Lord GOD, ‘and not that he should turn from his ways and live?’” ... “‘For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,’ says the Lord GOD. ‘Therefore turn and live!’”, Ezekiel 18:23, 32.*
- *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!”, Matthew 23:37.*

What a wonderful God we have! He had every right to pass judgement on the whole of humanity, for all had sinned, and to condemn unreservedly. And yet, over and over again, throughout the Bible we see God moving out in grace, desiring all to repent and turn to Him, to be saved. His overwhelming love is so great that He desires the worship and salvation of all, even those whom we would write off as too bad and undeserving of forgiveness. The last verse we quoted from Matthew's Gospel, Matthew 23:27 clearly shows this. Jesus' desire was to gather and protect Jerusalem, but His desire was not fulfilled as they were unwilling to be protected, such was the hardness of their hearts.

So how can we understand the two truths that are clearly right - the absolute sovereignty of God, and the free will that He has given to man? These two things are not contradictory. To contradict means to say one thing that must mean another is untrue. However, they are undoubtedly a paradox. The dictionary defines a paradox as 'a statement that seems to conflict with common sense but that contains a truth.' Now undoubtedly I find it difficult to reconcile these two thoughts, but then my perception should never be the measure by which I understand truth. Albert Einstein reckoned he was right only about 75% of the time, and I am no Einstein! I don't understand how many things can be e.g. memory, and yet I use it every day.

Time and again, throughout the Bible we see that God wills something to happen, which is clearly against His will. The story of Pharaoh (Exodus 5-14) is one example. God always desires obedience and humility, and yet we find God hardening Pharaoh's heart so that the glory of God would be displayed as He brought Israel out of Egypt. We see the supreme example of this twofold will of God at the cross. God had revealed His will clearly in the commandment: "[Thou] shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13) and yet, wonderfully, it was also the will of God, from before the foundation of the world, that Jesus should die. Those who cried out "Crucify Him" (Luke 23:21) chose to do so, and yet God used their sinful rejection and hatred to accomplish all that He had purposed. And in this we get an important lesson. Mankind does have freewill - and that is the choice to sin or to obey. Sadly, for all, that choice has been made in wilful disobedience. So no one can complain if they find themselves condemned by God. None will be in Hell because God has not chosen them but because they chose to sin. God did not create sin, nor does He prompt man to sin. However, He is able to use even man's sinful rejection of Him to fulfil His purposes, such is the greatness of His sovereignty.

So God clearly wills that all should be saved, so why are not all saved? Well, all would agree that it must be that He must be committed to something more valuable than the salvation of all. Arminians would say that it is the freedom for man to choose that God has given to us, but that would make God subject to our choices. I believe the principle that God holds equally of value is that of His own glory, displayed in both wrath and mercy. I believe the verses we read together in Romans 9:14-24 show this. On one level, God desires the salvation of all, but that must be balanced by the glory that He derives from the righteous judgement that is displayed on those who are lost. The latter in no way negates the former. Chief Justice John Marshall recounts the time in the life of George Washington when, faced with the treasonous acts of a Major Andre, he passed the death sentence on him. The United States was a young nation, and much rested on the establishment of law and order, and yet Washington was deeply moved by the plight of the young major. He had the power to commute the death sentence, but a higher passion stayed his hand. The pity he felt was genuine, but the wisdom he possessed enabled him to see a greater cause than his own desires. God's will is a single simple unity, but it appears to us to be complex and almost contradictory such is the profound greatness of His emotion and mind. Our intellect is simply not great enough to be able to wrestle with seeming contradictions to produce a single wholly satisfactory explanation for how God works.

In one way, I am glad about this. Imagine a God that I could wholly understand - he wouldn't be much of a god! We ought not to have any problem with accepting that there are depths to the workings and intellect of God that we simply cannot conceive. How can it be that at one and the same time He *"weeps with those who weep, and rejoices with those who rejoice"*, (see Romans 12:15) for example?

The other thing we need to remember is that all that God does, He does unconstrained by time. He made a decision to elect me long before the creation of the world, but existing also at the end of time, so being fully cognisant of all that I would do and decide. It is not that God existed a long time ago, and will exist for a long time into the future, so much as He exists at the same time in both what we describe as the past and the future. He knows each one of us better than we know ourselves, and so allowing us freedom to act, in no way constrains His ability to do as He pleases. Years ago, my son always wanted a football top for his birthday. We never asked him which one he wanted. We just bought him the beautiful red of Liverpool Football Club, for we knew he would have chosen no other. In a way, although we made the choice to purchase the shirt, his choice was in no way compromised. In a far more profound way, our ability to exercise freewill, as given by God, just dovetails perfectly into the exercise of God's sovereign will, to accomplish all that He has purposed.

This morning as we have considered the subject of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, we have just looked at the matter as it relates to salvation. This is because historically this is where believers have most come into conflict with each other. It is perhaps also most likely to be a point of contact with the lost. The principles that we have looked at apply to all aspects of life however.

We have seen that the Bible is most clear on upholding the unconditional sovereignty of God. All that He purposes to accomplish, He will do so. This does not make Him the author of sin, but rather great enough to accomplish His purpose even allowing for the sinfulness and failure of mankind exercising their free will. The Bible clearly shows that God has given man responsibility to obey Him, and to act in such a way, though mankind has singularly failed to do so. The Bible clearly teaches that God loves all of mankind, desiring their salvation and blessing, and to accomplish this came in the person of Jesus to die an atoning death on the cross of Calvary. The Bible also clearly teaches that

not all are saved, only those who are a part of the elect, or chosen. They are those whom God has chosen to have mercy on, who have responded to Him in the exercise of their free will in repentance. The awesome, divine magnificence of this accomplishment, that perfectly marries both unconditional sovereignty and human responsibility, is truly a source of inspirational worship as Paul recounts in Ephesians 3:14, 18: *"For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... [that we] may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height..."*. The Bible clearly teaches that one day every knee will bow to Him, and acknowledge, like Abraham, *"Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?"* (Genesis 18:25).

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