

Salvation: God's Love Forever

Bethany Bible Church, Adult Sunday School Class, May 26, 2013

'Faith'--The Gracious Gift of God

THE 'WHY'
OF
SALVATION

THE 'WHAT'
OF
SALVATION

THE 'HOW'
OF
SALVATION

THE 'WHO'
OF
SALVATION

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THE 'WHEN'
OF
SALVATION

THE 'WHERE'
OF
SALVATION

THE 'WONDER'
OF
SALVATION

Over our last few times together, we have been discussing the relationship between two realities involved in the doctrine of salvation--the reality of divine sovereignty (that is, that God chooses from the beginning who will be saved), and the reality of human responsibility (that is, that whoever believes on the Lord Jesus will be saved). All along, we have been maintaining that--even though we should keep these two realities distinct in our thinking--we should nevertheless hold them both to be equally biblical affirmations. We should never choose to believe one of these doctrines to the exclusion of the other. Both are taught in the Scriptures; and to deny either of them--as many often do--is to be unbalanced and unbiblical.

In our last lesson, we affirmed the reality of human responsibility. The free offer to all is, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved . . ." (Acts 16:31). And now, in this lesson, we affirm the other of the two realities--the absolute sovereignty of God in the matter of salvation.

1. **GOD SOVEREIGNTY ESTABLISHES HIS PURPOSE BEFORE TIME.**
 - A. Let's begin by going back to something we studied together when we were considering the initial goodness of God's creation. At that time, we said; "In the Book of Hebrews, God is quoted as saying that some who rebelled against Him would not enter His rest; and the writer adds that this is true, 'although the works were finished from the foundation of the world' (Hebrews 4:3). How much of God's work, then, should we consider to have been 'completed' by that sixth day? We're also told in Scripture that some things that Jesus uttered had been 'kept secret from the foundation of the world' (Matthew 13:35); that the Lord will invite people to enter the 'kingdom prepared' for them 'from the foundation of the world' (Matthew 25:34); that the Father chose the redeemed in Christ 'before the foundation of the world' (Ephesians 1:4); that the work of Christ was 'foreordained before the foundation of the world' (1 Peter 1:20); that Jesus is 'the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world' (Revelation 13:8); and that unbelieving people of this world are said to be 'not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world' (Revelation 17:8). The Bible tells us that, for God's elect, the hope of eternal life is based on that which 'God, who cannot lie, promised before time began' (Titus 1:1-2); and it displays a 'hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory' (1 Corinthians 2:7). It can truly be said then that, from the standpoint of the sovereign purposes of God, absolutely *all* of His works were finished by the sixth day--only to be brought to full realization in time afterward. Truly we can say, in praise to God, that 'in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them' (Psalm 139:16); and rejoice in the knowledge that 'we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them' (Ephesians 2:10). Taken in this context, we could go even further to say that when God declared His finished work 'very good', He was not looking only at the state of creation on the sixth day, but was looking far ahead to the full completion of His decree throughout eternity future. He looked ahead--through the temptation of the enemy, through the tragic fall of man, and through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross (who victoriously cried, 'It is finished' [John 19:30]); and on to the redemption of the elect in Christ,

and to the full glorification of sons and daughters in Christ; and declared 'very good' the certainty of their dwelling forever before Him in love in a new heaven and a new earth--all to the everlasting praise of His glory! What a staggeringly 'complete' work of creation it was that was completed on that sixth day!"

- B. In the light of all this, it's important to stress again that the tension between the two affirmations of God's sovereignty and human responsibility is not over whether God "elects" some for salvation before they are able to choose Jesus for themselves. The Bible clearly teaches that He does; so that we truly are "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Peter 1:2). The real tension comes from the question of what it is that is the basis of God's choice. Does He look down the corridor of time and sees that someone would one day choose Jesus? Certainly He does. But does He, on *that* basis, choose them before time for salvation; or does He foresee their choice because He Himself first chose them for it?

2. GOD GRACIOUSLY GIVES FAITH ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE.

- A. As we said earlier in our study of salvation, God's "foreknowledge" means much more than simply 'knowing about something beforehand'. It describes His divine commitment to someone in advance--based on what He has determined in His eternal will for them--by which He regards them with favor before they could ever be worthy, and makes them the object of His love before they could ever make themselves lovely. As Romans 8:29 puts it, "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." If He "predestines" whom He foreknows, then His prior knowledge about someone can only be on the basis of what it is that He had sovereignly established their destiny beforehand to be--not on the basis of what He sees them to be in any way independent of Him. And if He predestines those He commits Himself to unto salvation by grace before they ever were, then it must be that He also graciously determined to give them, in due time, the faith they would need in order to enter into the salvation He predestines them to.
- B. This does not--in any respect--do away with human responsibility to believe. Nor does it diminish our duty to offer the gospel freely to everyone--without concern over whether or not they are 'the elect'. But it *does* establish the confidence we can have in the success of the gospel toward those God sovereignly foreknows unto Himself. The sovereign God Himself will see to it. Two passages may be helpful here.
1. One is Ephesians 2:8-9. In that passage--after talking about the grace of God in raising us from spiritual deadness, and making us alive with Christ--Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Here, it's clear that we are saved--not by our works--but by God's grace. No one can, in any respect, boast about their salvation as if it were a result of their own works. It is God's "grace"--His free, unmerited, undeserved gift--that saves; and the hand from us that reaches out and takes hold of that free gift is our "faith". But where does the "faith" itself come from? It is the very faith itself to believe that is the "it" in the phrase "it is the gift of God". (The "grace" of salvation cannot be the "it" spoken of; because grace itself is--by definition--a gift. It would not make sense to say "For by 'the gift' you have been saved . . . and that not of yourselves; 'the gift' is the gift of God . . .") We are called to believe on the Lord Jesus; and

are promised that all who believe on Him will have eternal life. But even our ability to believe is the gracious gift of God--established in God's purpose before time--so that no one can boast.

2. Another passage to consider is Acts 13:48. When Paul and Silas came to Pisidian Antioch and preached the gospel in the synagogue, they were met with opposition from the Jews. They affirmed, however, that it was necessary to preach the gospel first to the Jews; but since they rejected it, the missionaries would now turn to the Gentiles. And we're told, "Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God." Then, we're given this amazing declaration--one that should be great encouragement to all missionaries and evangelists and true preachers of the gospel: "And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." Note that it was not those who "believed" that were appointed for eternal life; but those who were "appointed" that believed.

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To the best of our ability, then, we should hold to *both* divine sovereignty and human responsibility. We hold to God's sovereignty to the degree that it does not--in any way--deny the full responsibility of sinners to believe the gospel; and in full human responsibility to the degree that it remains dependent on the sovereign decree of God from before time.

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from The Holy Bible, New King James Version; copyright 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc.

²*Genesis & A Biblical Worldview*; Bethany Bible Church, Adult Sunday School Class, July 15, 2012.