

3. Why do we Pray? - Because God is a Sovereign God

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[0 : 00] Well, you might like to turn to the passage we read in Acts chapter 4, although we will be looking at one or two other places this evening, being as we are in a thematic study.

Our title for these few weeks has been, Why Do We Pray? And tonight in the third of our studies, the answer is, Because God is a Sovereign God.

Why do we pray? We pray because God is a Sovereign God. Now, we've been thinking about the whole subject of prayer these Sunday evenings, not as an exhortation, but rather as an explanation of prayer.

What prayer actually is, why prayer exists, why indeed it's possible at all. We've been seeking to explain in that way, rather than exhort, because, well, I for one certainly have found that thinking about things this way makes me far more interested in prayer and far more inclined to pray than just being told that I ought to pray more.

I suppose that's because I'm perverse, but then you also are perverse. So what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander too. I'm sure that this approach is more helpful for all of us.

[1 : 25] But it is, it's much more encouraging to think this way, isn't it? Because it means that instead of focusing on ourselves, we're focusing on God. And thinking about what God does and who God is, is always far, far more encouraging than thinking about ourselves, about what we are, about what we don't do, and what we should do more of.

So we're thinking about God. And we've seen so far that we pray at its most basic. We pray because God is a speaking God. God calls out to us and we answer.

He has called out to us supremely in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we answer him by faith. We pray. Prayer, as we said, is, if you like, it's the audible form of faith.

And we can do so. We can pray in that way, amazing as it is. We can actually call God our Heavenly Father. We can do that because we are, says the Gospel, adopted in his family.

We have become sons of God through the Spirit of Jesus Christ in our hearts. So we share that unique privilege of access at any time to the Father's presence that Jesus Christ, the Holy Son, has.

[2 : 53] It's like that story of the presence of sons, remember. He can barge into the Oval Office. We too, as sons of Almighty God, we can barge, as it were, into the Oval Office of Heaven to be heard.

No matter how many do not disturb signs that there might seem to be on the door. We pray because we are sons of God in Jesus Christ.

But today I want us to think about a third reason we pray and a reason that our prayer can be meaningful and effective and purposeful in both time and eternity. And it's this.

We pray because God is a sovereign God. Now at first you might think that doesn't sound right. You think I've made a mistake.

Because it's a common question, isn't it, about prayer. Often seems to people that God's sovereignty is actually a problem for prayer, not a reason for prayer.

[3 : 55] So people very often say things like this. Well look, if God is sovereign, if he knows all things, and if he's decided and predestined everything, then why would we pray at all?

What's the point of praying if God already decides and controls absolutely everything? What's the point of us praying? Well, let me just turn that around for a second to say this.

What would be the point of praying? What would be the point of us asking God to do things and make things happen if he didn't control and decide all things?

If he wasn't absolutely sovereign over every power and every authority in this universe and every other, what would be the point of us praying that God wasn't sovereign and couldn't do the things that we ask?

There wouldn't be any point at all, would there? There's no point in lobbying the gardener in number 10 Downing Street for a change in the law, is there?

[5 : 05] He doesn't have any influence. Nobody's been paying ex-cabinet ministers or offering them money to lobby the gardener in number 10 Downing Street, have they? But it seems that they have to be lobbying the government, to be lobbying the prime minister, because he is sovereign with his cabinet.

And only the one who is truly sovereign can answer that request. Only they have the power and the authority to do things, which is why people want access to them. And so it is with God.

What would be the point in us praying to God unless he were truly sovereign? You see, the church in Acts chapter 4, in the passage we read, they knew that perfectly well.

They were faced, weren't they, with the united opposition of all the powers in the world against them. But they prayed to a sovereign God. Acts 4 verse 24.

They lifted a voice together to God and they said, Sovereign Lord. What does that mean? It means he made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them and who spoke through the prophets exactly what was going to happen.

[6 : 16] So there's not a problem there for the Bible. And yet we do face what we see as a problem of logic, don't we?

Because here, as in many other areas of our faith, it can seem like the Bible is being a bit illogical. It seems illogical to us that if God is truly sovereign, then we can be held wholly accountable, wholly responsible for our actions.

That seems to be illogical to us. Or it seems that if we are truly and utterly responsible, then it doesn't seem that God can really be wholly and completely sovereign.

That seems to us a problem of logic. Well, it is. It is a problem of logic. But what the Bible tells us is that it's a problem of our logic, not God's logic.

And that's because God's logic is a higher logic than ours. And that means that we, as created human beings, we can't fully fathom it. We can't fully understand it.

[7 : 31] It's as simple as that. It's beyond us. But that doesn't mean it's not true. Acts 4, you see, sees nothing illogical, does it?

In stating that God's enemies in killing Jesus were nevertheless doing exactly what God's sovereign hand had predestined would happen.

They were gathered against your holy servant Jesus, verse 27, to do, verse 28, what your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. The Bible sees no logical problem in that, even if we do.

Because it's a higher logic. And we can't fully understand it. We've just got to accept that. Now, I know some of you might be sitting there and say, well, that's very unsatisfactory.

If you're a skeptic, you might be saying, well, that is a typical Christian sort of cop-out. That is just nonsense. You can't argue your logic, so you run off and you take refuge in mystery, saying you can't explain it.

[8 : 42] I heard Anthony Grayling on the radio just a few weeks ago saying exactly that thing. Ah yes, you Christians, you fly away off and you take refuge in mystery. I've heard Richard Dawkins say and write very similar things.

Is that what we're doing? No, that's not what we're doing. What we're doing when we say that there are things beyond us that we cannot understand, well, it's called humility.

We're simply saying that we as human beings are not omniscient. And we're not arrogant enough to assume that unless we can absolutely understand something, then it can't possibly be true.

Unlike, it has to be said, what, well, Anthony Grayling and Richard Dawkins and others were seeming to be saying. If it's beyond my understanding, it can't possibly be true.

I don't know about you, but there are lots of things that are beyond my understanding which are nevertheless true. I can't understand relativity theory. There might be some people here who can, but probably not very many.

[9 : 53] But I don't thereby totally reject it. I've got very good reason to trust Professor Einstein, even though it's way beyond my level of mathematics, way beyond my understanding of physics.

It's beyond my logic, but I accept that there might be a higher logic at work than mine. And that humility is something that we recognize as necessary in all kinds of ways, at all kinds of different levels in our life.

So, for example, if you have a young child, she asks her mother for an ice cream. And she knows that her mother loves her and it's a hot day and her mother gives her an ice cream.

It's very logical. She's experienced it before. She knows her mother loves her. She knows she wants an ice cream. She knows it's very hot. She asks for an ice cream and mother will get her an ice cream because she's a loving mother.

It's logical to the child. But if the little girl keeps on going asking for more and more ice cream, there's going to come a time, isn't there, where mother's going to say no? And little child is going to get upset.

[11 : 07] Get to cry, perhaps. It's illogical. Why is mommy not giving me ice cream anymore? Doesn't she love me anymore? It's beyond the child's logic, isn't it?

If one ice cream is good and two ice creams is even better, the third ice cream is not going to happen. Well, there's a higher logic at work, isn't there, than the little child's logic.

That's mother's logic. Thank goodness for mother's logic. Father's logic isn't always the same. It's usually good for an extra ice cream or two, isn't it? Especially if dad gets one too. But you see, it's the same principle, isn't it, with God?

Just exactly the same. By definition, if God is God and we're creatures, we're his children, sometimes his good and perfect logic will seem, for us, totally impossible to fathom.

It will seem illogical. It will seem as though logic has broken down. But it's simply a matter of our incomplete knowledge, of our limited experience, in contrast to his complete knowledge and his infinite experience.

[12 : 12] So you see, we are not the arbiters of God's logic. And we need to think about the Bible's logic in these matters.

And we need to humbly seek to trust the logic that Scripture reveals to us. Even though we can't understand all of these things, it doesn't mean that they can't be true.

Even though we can't see logically how this can be true at the same time as that, when the Bible tells us, nevertheless, if we have good enough authoritative grounds to be told by somebody we trust that it really is true, then surely the logical thing for us to do is to trust that.

And when we have the assurance of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, well, I'm willing to trust him. We have to do that in all kinds of different ways, just in our own experience.

I was listening to the radio the other day and there was a discussion about the great breakthrough there was in science when scientists finally understood that light was both a waveform and consisted of particles.

[13 : 25] And that was an inconceivable thing for people to understand. I don't think I understand it myself, how light can consist of particles and also be a wave. Some of you can understand that and can explain it, but it took a long time.

It was a great breakthrough. But I believe it and planes fly in the air and spaceships go to the moon and things because it's true. And likewise, God, the Bible tells me, is wholly sovereign.

But we, as human beings, we are wholly responsible. I can't fathom that fully. But I believe and I trust Jesus Christ and his apostles enough to believe that it's true when they tell me that it is.

We'll get to prayer, but first, let's think about this Bible's logic of the sovereignty of God in salvation. And we'll go on to think about that more specifically in terms of the Bible's logic of God's sovereignty in our prayers.

First, in the Bible's logic of the sovereignty of God in salvation. Think about that. Prayer, you see, as we've already seen, is simply an expression of salvation, the bigger thing.

[14 : 45] Restoration of prayer is an integral part of the restoration of our true and right relationship with God, our salvation. And so, the whole question of how our prayers play a meaningful part in things with a sovereign God.

It's just a subset, isn't it, of the question of our responsibility for faith if God is wholly sovereign. And that bigger issue can often seem to be a problem of logic.

It's an apparent contradiction because the Bible is very, very clear about two things being true which often seem to us to be contradicting one another.

First of all, the Bible is absolutely clear about this. We are responsible for our sins. We must repent. That was Jesus' message, wasn't it? Again and again.

Repent. That was the Apostle's message after him, always. Repent. Turn. Absolutely no doubt about that. And yet, secondly, the Bible is equally clear and plain that we cannot do that one thing that we are commanded to do, to repent.

[15 : 56] Unless God, by his sovereign power, should cause us to repent. Repentance is something the Bible tells us that God alone can give.

If you look down to Acts 5, verse 31, that's what the Apostles say very plainly. Jesus is raised so that God might grant repentance and forgiveness to his people.

Ephesians chapter 2, verse 1, is just as plain when Paul is describing the process of salvation. He says, you were dead in your transgressions. Well, dead people cannot bring themselves to life themselves, can they?

They can't do anything. Only God's power can do that. As Jesus says, through his sovereign call, the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear shall live.

There's no doubt it's a sheer sovereign call of God's saving grace. God's power will hear the truth. But you see, the Bible is equally clear that those two things are true.

[16 : 59] It's not either or, one or the other. It's not either God is really sovereign and therefore he must call people into salvation or we are really responsible and therefore we must repent.

The Bible is clear. It's both of those things. Both God is sovereign and we are responsible. It's a higher logic that's at work. It doesn't mean it's illogical though.

Nor does it mean that we can't grasp anything at all about how this can be so. In fact, we can. We can see how this works out even in our own world, even in our experience to a degree because in fact responsibility is not actually incompatible with authority.

It actually flows from it. Notice I'm using the language by the way of responsibility. I'm not using the words free will. That's a different thing. Free will is not actually a biblical concept at all.

Free will in the sense of human beings being totally and utterly free in terms of total libertarian freedom to do exactly and totally as they please against God.

[18 : 11] That's not a biblical concept. That would be absolutely at odds with a truly sovereign God. But human beings according to the Bible are wholly responsible for their actions and that is not incompatible, not at all with God's sovereign authority.

Your drunk driver doesn't have free will. He's not free is he to drive with all his full faculties. He's not free in that sense.

But he does bear full responsibility for his actions if he kills someone. No defense for him to stand in the court and say sorry my lord I was drunk I can't possibly be held responsible for this accident.

That's laughable isn't it? That's no defense that's pleading guilty. He's responsible precisely because he is drunk. He's responsible even though he doesn't have free will in the sense of complete libertarian freedom to drive with all due care and attention.

he's responsible because like absolutely everybody else on the roads he is in a relationship with authority. In this case with the law of the land.

[19 : 24] And all true responsibility when you think about it actually presupposes a relationship of authority. It's authority that confers responsibility and therefore dignity and value also on people.

If your boss gives you a task and he says to you now look John I'm going to make you responsible for this. You don't say oh I can't possibly be held responsible for this because my boss is sovereign because he has the authority.

Of course not. It's because he has the authority to make you responsible that you are therefore made responsible that you can be held accountable. And you wouldn't be responsible at all unless he had the authority to make you responsible.

To make you accountable. And that's the way the Bible talks about our responsibility before a sovereign God regarding his sovereign salvation. Salvation begins with God.

He is sovereign. He has all the authority. And therefore he makes us responsible to respond to his command. He makes us responsible to his call of salvation.

[20 : 38] God speaks his saving word and we will either express submission to that word or rebellion against it. We'll either respond with what the Bible calls the obedience of faith or with the disobedience of unbelief.

But either way we are fully responsible to God because he has given us sovereignly that responsibility to respond. and that's the Bible's logic of God's sovereignty and salvation.

It's a both and logic. That means that we can never say oh well God's sovereign I don't need to repent. If I'm elect well I'll be saved because God's sovereign.

We can never say that. Nor can we ever say oh well it's not my fault I can't respond if I'm not elect. So how can God possibly hold me responsible? No. Acts 17 verse 30 tells us God commands all people everywhere to repent.

His sovereign authority calls every single human being to account. It's both that he is sovereign and that he calls us to account and makes us responsible.

[21 : 52] And you see it's just the same when we think about prayer. We can never say oh God is sovereign so we never need to pray. And we can never say oh God is sovereign so there's no point in praying.

No. Biblical logic said God is sovereign therefore not only can I pray but I must pray and I will pray. It's both and in the Bible's logic of God's sovereignty in our salvation and let's think secondly and more specifically about how it's both and in the Bible's logic of the sovereignty of God and our prayer.

First let me just deal with a very common but I think quite an unhelpful view of prayer. It's summed up by an aphorism which I suppose is quite common among evangelical Christians and it's this.

Prayer changes things. Prayer changes things. I'm sure you've heard that many times. I'm sure I've probably said it myself many times and it sounds good and like many aphorisms there is a lot of truth.

There's some truth anyway but underneath what I suppose is quite a pious sounding phrase there often lurks what is actually a very wrong view of God because it smacks of trying to persuade God to do something that he otherwise won't do.

[23 : 22] It rather assumes in fact sometimes it even asserts that God can't work unless we pray or God won't work unless we pray. Sometimes I've even heard people saying that God's helpless to do anything unless his people are truly praying.

That implies that God is impotent in some way without the help of our prayers. And really that's quite a blasphemous thing when you think about it.

If you keep pushing in that direction saying that kind of thing you end up with the God of what's called open theism. Theological belief that God can't really know the future.

He can't control the future because really he's contingent on the choices that people in this world make, that his creatures make. What that idea really ends up with is totally de-Godding God.

just flatly denies the whole witness of scripture in every place. It reduces God to one who was really like a genie in Aladdin's lamp dancing to our tune at our beck and call there to serve us, to answer our prayers.

[24 : 38] The whole future is not so dependent on God but dependent on us because it's about what we ask God to do. That's not biblical Christianity at all.

That's simply paganism. The religions, the made up religions of this world that are there to control God through idols and sacrifices and so on.

Now we can't possibly hold to any kind of view like that about our God if we read scripture in any place at all. Just let me read a few verses from Isaiah chapter 46 that blows that completely out of the water.

I am God, he says, there is no other. I am God, there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying my counsel shall stand and I will accomplish all my purpose, calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country.

I have spoken and I will bring it to pass. I have purposed and I will do it. That's just a few verses.

[25 : 50] You could almost pick them at random from the prophet Isaiah from many other parts of the scripture as well. Totally blows out of the water any sense of that idea that God won't or far worse that God can't do things without his people's prayers.

Nonsense. No, prayer changes things. If we mean that by that phrase that prayer takes control of God and his thoughts and his ways, well that just won't do at all.

A much better saying is this one. Prayer is thinking God's thoughts after him. I remember my father telling me that when I was a young child and that really is a much better way of expressing the Bible's logic about prayer.

because it tells us that the logic of prayer is not a sort of cold mathematical logic but it is a warm relational logic.

Remember, prayer is the audible witness of a real relationship with God. The truth about prayer, you see, is that God, the sovereign Lord, invites us into a place of privileged partnership with him.

[27 : 09] A real partnership in his business, if you like. And that's what our prayers are. We're going along after him, with him, learning about his business and having a share in it.

We pray because we're now sons and as sons we share God's family business. That's what sons do. They share in the privilege of their birth into the family firm.

They therefore share the goals of the whole enterprise that the family is involved in. You see, in the gospel, God has revealed to us his great business, his great purpose of salvation for this world in Christ.

And not only that, he's granted us a part, a real part, a real share in the ongoing concern of his family business. We have a part in almighty God and sons, unlimited, you might say.

We've got a part in it. He's given it to us. He's called us to be involved. Now we could. I suppose we could rebel against that whole concern.

[28 : 18] That would be as bizarre, wouldn't it, as somebody who's just been made up to be junior partner in a big firm and then devoting themselves to working totally against the ethos of the whole firm, setting themselves totally at odds with the senior partner.

It's just ridiculous. The most natural thing, of course, is that you throw everything into the vision, the ethos, the goals of the company that you've been made a partner in.

And friends, that's the way it is with us. God's big picture, his great sovereign salvation, surely it will become our great concern as well. Because we're thinking his thoughts after him.

And we'll share his heart's desire, we'll share his passion. And those sorts of things will begin to fill our prayers. So you see in Paul's prayers, as they're exemplified in the New Testament, isn't it?

Read them later. Read Ephesians 1 or Ephesians 3, for example. He's praying that they will grasp the dimensions of the greatness of the salvation of God. He's praying that there will be glory in the church in Christ Jesus forever.

[29 : 32] That's real Christian prayer. He's thinking God's thoughts after him. He's praying in line with God's purposes for all of history and for eternity. That doesn't exclude, of course, prayer for small things or personal things or specific things.

Of course it doesn't. The same Paul writes to the Philippians, saying exactly that, doesn't he? Bring all your requests before God. Don't be anxious about anything, he says. But nevertheless, even there in Philippians, if you read it, it's in the context, isn't it?

Of wanting to set their eyes upon the goal that is to come, upon everything that is yet to be, of the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ from heaven. That's the context of their whole thinking.

And real gospel prayer always does that. Real gospel prayer always is thinking God's thoughts after him. It has God's goal in view. That means we have to ask ourselves very practical questions, don't we, about where our prayer focus is.

Whose thoughts are we thinking when we pray? In our church prayer meeting, for example, is it all about small things? Is it all about personal things?

[30 : 49] Is it all about things to do with us? And our present health or our present circumstances or whatever else? Is that true in our own personal prayers? In our family prayers?

Or is it always whatever we're praying for, is it undergirted by a great focus on the great issues of Christ and his coming kingdom? Of thinking God's thoughts after him?

It's not so much what we pray for, whether it's large or small things, but it's what's motivating our prayer that really matters. We need to ask ourselves that. Is it all in line with the ethos, with the great goal of our Father's business?

Just as it was, as we read in Acts chapter 4. Hear their threats, they said, and they were very real and present. Some of them had just been in prison. And keep us from further threats.

No. Hear their threats and keep us on witnessing to the gospel of Jesus Christ. May we keep on speaking the word boldly. That's the goal, you see. They're thinking God's thoughts after him.

[32 : 02] That's just the sheer privilege of prayer that is granted to us. To think God's thoughts after him. To be involved in his great purpose of salvation as partners in his family business.

Because he is sovereign. And because he has that purpose that will accomplish everything that he has purposed by his grace. And because we have been invited to be part of that team.

Part of the team that will not only accomplish the purpose, but also share in the glory. I don't know who's going to win the English Premiership this year.

Chelsea look as if they've thrown away a good chance by losing two points today. Manchester United are still four points ahead with one game less to play than Chelsea.

Not sure I'd bet against Sir Alex Ferguson. What is it? I don't know how many championships he's won now. Nobody would doubt, would they, thinking about Sir Alex Ferguson, his sovereignty, his authority and his control over Manchester United.

[33 : 10] He is supremely the great architect of victory, isn't he? It's quite an astonishing history that he's had at the club. But just imagine that things were different in the league and it was one more game to play in the season.

And Sir Alex Ferguson's team are ten points ahead and there are five games in hand. They're unreachable and their last game is against Portsmouth or somebody languishing at the bottom of the Premiership.

And he's chosen you to play alongside his galaxy of stars in that last game.

To finish the league. To wear the medal. To lift the cup. That's a certain course that God our Father has called us to be part of in our prayers.

He's called us to join his team in a goal that is as certain and a hundred times more certain even than that. Let me read to you Jesus' own words from Matthew chapter 9.

[34 : 25] The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

You see what he's saying? The sovereign Lord has decreed that the harvest is plentiful. That there shall be a great harvest for his kingdom.

He is sovereign in salvation. Therefore, says the Lord Jesus Christ, we are to pray earnestly to he who alone is the Lord of the harvest that he will send out laborers through whom that harvest that he is decreed will be accomplished.

You see, you are to pray to be aligned with his thoughts, with his wonderful gracious merciful thoughts. And by doing so, become a part of the accomplishing of that great goal.

We pray because God is a sovereign God. Because as his sons we share in the glory of that purpose for the world. Can you imagine being picked to play in that certain premiership winning team?

[35 : 51] and turning around to Sir Alex Ferguson and saying, oh no, I can't be bothered. It's in the bag. Everybody knows who's going to win. I'll not bother. Of course you wouldn't.

You want to be on that winning pitch. And you want to hear that final whistle, having had the sweat pouring off you and the joy of playing that game.

But you want to go and get that medal and go up in the stand and lift the cup. Even though you know no other team in the league has got any possible chance of beating you to that. You want to be on the pitch.

And that's why we pray. Because God wants us to be on the pitch. Thinking his thoughts after him. Playing our part in a certain glorious victory.

The bringing in of the kingdom of his son. And you see, the more we think his thoughts after him, the more we rejoice in talking about those thoughts with him in prayer.

[37 : 06] And with one another also in prayer. So thank God that we can pray as believers. Because our God truly is a sovereign God.

Otherwise, we couldn't pray at all. Well, let's pray. Sovereign Lord, how we thank you that the issues in time and eternity, every one of them is in your hands.

God, we thank you that the God of God is in your hearts. But I would thank you also that you've called us to fill our minds and hearts with these glorious purposes after you.

And to so be on the pitch in your team. Rejoice in sharing in your victory. Help us, sovereign Lord, to pray.

To pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.