

The Sovereignty of God - Adult SS - Lesson 6: Sovereignty, Prayer & Evangelism

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Preacher: Andrew Kueh

[0 : 00] Amen. So this is the last session of the sovereignty of God. And so we're going to have half term next week. And then we'll be starting a new series.

! It's going to be a one-off. And then Sam Tannercliffe is going to be doing a series on history for you. So I'll keep an eye out on your emails. I'll send out a little video on that. But this is our last session on the sovereignty of God.

And we've been thinking this term. We've seen this term that God is sovereign over all things. Every detail of the universe, he's sovereign over.

And by sovereign, we mean God's kingly rule and power and control and authority and plan over all things. God is sovereign over all things because he has decreed it all from eternity.

He's already said what's going to come to pass. And so we've been looking at the confession.

Remember, if Sunday school is like a zoo, we're gathering all the data into one place, all the data of the Bible into one place like a zoo, all the animals together.

[1 : 04] And the confession is like our map, our guide around the zoo. And so look at 3.1 of the confession. God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.

Everything. And last week, we thought about that lingering question in all of this. What about free will? If God is sovereign in this way, doesn't that make us robots or puppets on a string?

And if so, doesn't that make us not responsible for sin? If God decreed it, we might say, well, God surely made me do it then. Well, we saw last week, we often wrongly assume what type of free will we have.

We wrongly assume we have what we call absolute free will. Freedom just to do whatever we want. Every option is equally possible. But actually, as we thought last week, we aren't free in all sorts of ways.

So do you remember? We aren't. So if all options in life are like doors, right? You've got infinite doors in front of us. All those, not all those doors are open to us, right?

[2 : 20] I'm not free to fly like Superman. I'm not free just to be perfectly sinless right now. I don't, I can't choose that option. And we also saw Jesus wasn't free to walk away from the cross, right?

That wasn't a possibility in the plan of God. And so there are all sorts of things that we aren't free to do. So just to assume, oh, but we have free will.

We can do everything. Everything should be possible. That isn't the freedom that we have. And importantly, we aren't free to choose something outside the sovereign will of God.

So if we can see, if we can't fly, we can't be sinners, but we also need to just recognize other limitations. We aren't free to act outside of God's will.

And the Bible shows us our decisions and our choices, and even our hearts are ultimately under God's sovereignty. Yet, at the same time, the Bible affirms that we do have choices.

[3 : 31] And our choices really do belong to us. It is our will, our hearts, our choices. And when you hear that, it kind of, it jars you, doesn't it, right?

But hold on, how can that be? And that's the mystery to all of this. These are simply two truths that we hold together. We don't know exactly how they can fit.

It's beyond our finite minds. But God is sovereign over our wills and our decisions. Yet, at the same time, they do belong to us. They are real in that sense.

We do have real wills and choices. And again, the confession holds these two together. God, from all eternity, did by the most wise and counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordained

whatsoever comes to pass.

Yet, so as thereby, neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, right? It doesn't destroy our will. Nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

[4 : 39] Now, this last phrase we're going to look at in a moment. So, it is simply both, right? And this is the mystery. And it's not always easy to sit with.

This is something you can puzzle over your whole life. But it's just something that we need to humbly hold together. And rather than let our minds say, no, no, no, hold on.

I don't like that. Those things can't fit together. That can't be the case. Rather than that, we need to let the Bible tell us what is true and what is reality.

And then when we don't understand some of those things, to humbly accept, okay, this must be true. And so, I will trust God and accept it. And in fact, rather than God being a puppeteer controlling us like puppets, actually, we ended last week seeing that God's sovereignty actually establishes our free will.

It is only because God has sovereignly decreed all of this and created all of this and is upholding everything. It's only because of that that we are able to have any freedom at all.

[5 : 51] So, God's sovereignty, you can kind of think of it like this. It's not, he's not like a puppeteer from above moving us with invisible strings. It's not so much that. It's more like, God's sovereignty is more like the ground beneath which, on which we can have any choice at all, right?

But we left off last week thinking about what the Bible does speak about our wills. So, if that's kind of not how to think about it and kind of generally the right way to think about it.

Okay, but what does the Bible say, positively say about our wills? What does it say about the freedom that we do have? And we left off last week, didn't have enough time to finish this, but we saw that it doesn't speak of us having free will, absolute free will in that sense.

It speaks of our wills as choosing what our hearts want, right? Our wills mean that we choose what our hearts want. And there are four states of our hearts that we can choose from, right?

And this is the first thing I want us to see today. We're kind of finishing off a bit from last week, and then we'll move on to something a little bit different in the second half, right? I want us to look at the four states of our hearts.

[7 : 04] So, the Bible speaks of our wills. I want us to see how the Bible speaks about our wills, our decision-making, and how the Bible speaks about true freedom.

And to do this, I want you to break out into groups. There's a little, in the dotted box, there are five questions. So, break out into groups. I'll give you a few minutes for that.

We're going to look at the four states of our heart, the four types of decision-making the Bible speaks about. Let's see what we have. So, the first question, how does the Bible speak of how we make our choices?

Daily worry. Daily worry. Yeah, yeah, the first one. How does the Bible speak of how we make choices?

Like, the very top question. It comes in, it comes out, and it's different. When the heart comes out, it's our action. Oh, okay, yes. Yeah, yeah, do you see that? We make our choices from our hearts, right?

[8 : 07] So, the choices ahead of us, they're not determined just by kind of random choice, or that we can just equally choose among all the options of the doors.

No, we make our choices from our hearts, right? This is how the Bible speaks of free will. We are free in the sense that we do what our hearts want.

This is how the Bible speaks of freedom. And this is also why we are responsible for our choices. When I choose to do something, I choose to do it.

So, when I choose to do something, in my heart, I want to do it. Therefore, I was free to do it, in that sense. I'm responsible for it.

And when the Bible speaks of this freedom, it particularly speaks of our freedom to sin or not sin, right? Or obey God, right? And as soon as you start thinking in those categories, we need to understand that there are four states of the heart that we need to consider when humans choose to sin or not sin, right?

[9 : 19] Four types of freedom, you could say. And with that in mind, let's think of those next four questions. When it comes to sinning, what was Adam's heart able to do?

Let's start at the beginning, the first human heart. What was Adam's heart able to do? Genesis 2. Rebecca. Okay, he was able.

He had the choice, the freedom. He was able to sin. What was he also able to do? To not sin, right? There was the choice between him. You can eat or you can not eat, right?

And his heart, when you think about his heart, his heart was able to choose either, right? He hadn't fallen yet. He wasn't pulling towards sin. He could have chosen, in terms of his heart, he could have chosen either, right?

He was able to sin and able to not sin. And so we're not thinking about God's decree here. We, of course, know God planned all things. And so in some sense, in terms of the decree of God, he was always going to eat the apple.

[10:32] But in terms of his heart, that freedom, he could have done either. And this is the first state, the first way you can understand the human heart.

So if we have the choice of sin here, or not sin, or obedience, or righteousness, right? The first state, to think back, is Adam.

And he had the freedom to not sin, and the freedom to sin.

That's a little heart there, by the way, if you don't know what that is, right? His heart could have gone either way. But now let's think about the second state of humanity. Before we are saved, so that now Adam has fallen, and we have fallen in him.

Before we are saved, what are our hearts able to do? Noah, go for it. Sorry? Commit sin, right? We're slaves to sin, exactly.

[11:37] We can't help but sin. That's what our hearts want. Our hearts and our wills just naturally want to sin. And in that sense, we aren't free.

We're enslaved, right? Because that's all we can do. But in another sense, we do still have free will, remember? Think about, if free will is doing what our hearts want, we are free to sin, right?

Because we want to. We freely choose to sin because that's what our hearts want. But we aren't free not to sin, right? We're enslaved in that way.

And that's why God must sovereignly save us. Remember, we're dead in sin, but we're trapped in it. And so, this is the second way to understand it.

I've drawn that one too small. That's not good. All right. Still a bigger person here. All right. So in sin, we are, sorry, this way.

[12:38] we are only choosing to sin. That's where our freedom takes us. But now let's think about the third state.

When God saves us, what are our hearts able to do? Look at Romans 6. John.

Not sin and produce righteousness. Okay. We've got a third one. We are now, because that's what the command in Romans 6, do not present your members to unrighteousness, but to righteousness.

All right. So we are able to not sin. But also, what does that commandment assume as well? What are we also able to do? Also able to sin.

Okay. But this, this is huge. Something changes when God saves us. Sin's power over our hearts gets broken.

[13:45] We're no longer slaves to sin, only going in one direction. But now, we are free not to sin. Right?

We can actually start obeying God and living righteous lives. Now, we will still sin. We will still kind of choose that, have that desire in our heart. But now there's a pull in both directions.

God has transformed our hearts. So, we now want to love God. You can even feel that in your heart now. Right? That, that, even smallest, struggling desire, but even the smallest one to love God, that is you transformed, raised from the dead by God.

We are now free to not sin. All right. So we've got a pull in both directions. But now let's think about glory in the new creation, in the resurrection.

What will our hearts be able to do? Rory Hunter, you're looking at me. They're not able to sin. Oh, very good. Right? In glory, sin will be an impossibility.

[14:53] Right? We will not be able to sin. There's nothing unclean. Do you see in Revelation 21? Nothing unclean. Not even the smallest desire in our heart.

Right? We will only be able to not sin. Right? That pull in our hearts towards sin will be gone.

Our wills will be totally released to love God. And in that sense, if you think about that, in that sense, we will be the free, the most free that we could possibly be.

The most human we could possibly be. Sin will be no more and we'll be freely, truly free to be who we are meant to be.

who God designed humanity to be. And this is the fourth state of human freedom. And this is how the Bible gets us to think about free will and freedom.

[15:52] We are all free in the sense that we do what our hearts want. but it's in this final state here in glory that we are most free because our will and our heart will not be bound by sin anymore.

And so when people think, no, no, no, hold on, to be truly free, we must be able to choose all the options out there, open up all the doors equally to sin or not to sin or to do anything.

I must be able to choose or not choose all those things then I'm free. Well if we think like that we've just got freedom all wrong. True freedom is actually not being able to do something, not being able to sin.

And that is what God has saved us for. That's our destiny and God's sovereignty doesn't destroy that freedom. In fact, God's sovereignty is our only hope of having that freedom.

Because it's in God's sovereignty that he raises us from the deadness of our sin, releases us from the slavery of sin, transforms our hearts, frees us from that guilt and that power of sin and makes us truly free in Christ.

[17:11] And so all those in Christ here today, we are free now. Christ has freed us from the slavery of sin. We can now not sin and love God.

but one day our hearts are going to be truly free forever. And so it's this final state that this is how the Bible speaks of true freedom.

We're going to move on to something a little bit different now because this was meant to be on the tail end of last week. But let me pause for questions there. Any questions on this? Yeah.

Yeah. Two questions. Yeah. One of the characters is saying that if we understand freedom is just having any choice we want, that's not the right definition, but rather it's freedom from control and that's in this diagram where we're being set free from the control of sin to the point where there is no control over us apart from our feelings of the God's mind that's that way.

Yeah. Yes. Yeah. So there are lots of ways to understand freedom, right?

[18:27] So first of all, we're not saying absolute freedom to choose absolutely anything, right? So it's not that. But in one sense, even in the slavery of sin, we're free in the sense of we do what our hearts want.

So if we define freedom as doing what our hearts want, we're free in that sense. We freely choose to sin before we're saved, right? We love it.

We want to do it. So in that sense, we're free. If you kind of zoom out a little bit, we realise actually that that's not true freedom.

That's, yeah, we are, we're trapped in that wanting to sin. and so there is a different way we can now think about freedom. It's being released from that pull and power of sin to actually now be free to love God.

So I know I'm kind of swapping definitions a little bit as we go over this. It's because it's kind of speaking in freedom in different ways. Yeah. I don't know if that clarified. Yeah.

[19:30] My second question was about state one, the idea that Adam is free to choose either. Yeah. But then we know that for always were days before.

So in what sense then was he actually free to choose? In what sense exactly? So remember I keep kind of like swapping between definitions or needing to address, maybe not swapping, needing to address all these different types of definitions, right?

He's free in what your questions, in what sense is he free? He's free in the sense of his heart. Okay. Remember when we think about freedom of the heart, so you've got, that's the middle one I kind of point out here, right?

We are free to do what our heart wants. Okay. If we understand free will in that sense, when we look at Adam's heart, he hadn't fallen yet. He was still in an innocent state.

He was free to not sin and also to sin as we found out, right? It was, kind of physically heart-wise possible to do both.

[20:34] But now you ask, but in terms of God's decree, actually let's kind of go back this way, in terms of God's decree, you couldn't have, right? God had decreed the fall.

Yes, but now we're changing a different, we're now speaking of freedom in a different sense, right? So, yeah, ultimately nothing can happen outside of God's will, but in terms of in time, in creation, as we look at Adam's heart, he was free to choose either.

Now, we're trying to hold these two together at the same time, aren't we? We're trying to hold the two definitions and like in time, in eternity, hold them together. How can that be?

And I know kind of our brains start to kind of, the cogs start to crank here. That's the mystery. And so what I'm trying to do is just speak of freedom in the way that the Bible speaks of it.

And it can, yeah, it can get confusing when we start to use different definitions and then holding them together. Exactly. Toby. So, before the Paul, there was no sin.

[21 : 44] So Adam was not a slave in sin. Correct, yeah. Yeah. perfect.

Thanks. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So he, he, he wasn't, his heart, how was his heart, how was he free and how was he escaping?

Are you asking, okay, if he, if he wasn't fallen yet, so he didn't have that pull towards sin, are you asking, well, why did he, if it didn't exist, he couldn't have had a pull first.

Yeah, right, yeah. But are you asking, so then how could he have chosen it then? Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Don't know. Don't know.

We know it's a possibility, God laid it out there, but how could an innocent heart choose sin, like a corruption that was never there? Yeah, it's a good question.

[22 : 51] I don't know. And there's, there's, it's right to ask the question. If you think about the nature of sin, so a helpful way of understanding sin is, sin is mad, bad, and sad, right?

Or bad, sad, and mad, right? It's bad in the sense of it's wrong, it's morally wrong, it breaks God's law, it's bad. It's sad because sin causes misery, it's just a sad thing to be in a stage of sin, and it's mad as well.

There's no reason behind it, right? Why would I sin this past week when my God has saved me and I love my God and it's just misery to choose sin and it just ruins relationship?

Why would I still do that? Because it's mad. In some sense you start peeling back the layers of sin and it just keeps going on. there's almost an infinite reason, a mad reason behind it.

It's just a void of darkness. That's why Jesus says they hated me without a cause. And so you can kind of apply that with also sprinkling of mystery to the fall.

[24 : 04] Why would Adam, when he had all of this, there was no corruption, he loved God, he communed with God, God walked with him in the garden, he had everything. Why would he choose that? It's mad.

Yeah. And sprinkle that with a lot of mystery. Yeah. Don't know why. Yeah. Or don't know how. Yeah.

Go for it. So we say there is no sin in the fall. In Adam's heart, yeah. There'd be no...

Go on. So there sin when she ran to the tree of the of tree the tree tree tree tree tree of of tree! tree There is no sin, but there is one restriction.

[25 : 20] Yeah. There is one comment that's just like, she's seen. Yeah, so she did sin.

It's kind of taken, I guess, a whole event. Yeah, she did sin. But what's the issue? You're saying she sinned before the fall that Adam caused.

And so how can those two fit together, are you saying? Yeah, the sin was available. The sin was available? Yes. I think I know what you're getting at.

Let's chat afterwards. Yeah. Is that okay? If you want to. Yeah, yeah. Hands up if you want me to keep pursuing this question. Great. Do it afterwards.

Do it afterwards. I want to also clarify. Let's think about something. This is going to be quite different. Prayer and evangelism. Right. Oh, man, we've got five minutes to do this.

[26 : 24] Right. Right. Right. We'll, we probably won't finish this. Let's just go. So another common issue we have, we might have in our minds is, okay, if God is sovereign, if he has planned all things, all events and decreed all things and nothing can change his will, why pray.

Why pray? Why ask God to change these events we're going through or protect us in the future and ask him for anything, really? And related to that question, well, why evangelize?

Right. If God is the one who saves, if he has his elect and those names are written in the book of life and nothing can add to or change that number, why bother preaching or evangelizing or showing the gospel?

Well, I want us to see, rather than being a problem to prayer and evangelism, I want us to see God's sovereignty is exactly what we need for prayer and evangelism. But to answer this, we need to see something first. This might seem a bit odd, what we're doing here, but roll with me. Hopefully it will click. Right. I want you to, I want us to see point A. God uses second causes to achieve his eternal decree.

[27 : 38] Right. I know, I know this sounds a bit weird. Roll with me. Right. Just look at what the confession has to say about this. So God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordained whatsoever comes to pass.

Yet so as thereby, neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. So just look at that little phrase at the end. There's two words. There's two words. Second causes. All right. There's lots of other words, but I'll try and simplify this. Right. In the confession, it says we can speak of two causes.

Right. God is the first eternal cause. Right. He's the reason why anything happens and everything is dependent on him.

Right. So we decree all things. God is the first cause. Okay.

[28 : 41] But there are also second causes within creation. Right. Created things that also cause things to happen.

So like a cloud causing rain. Right. Or fire causing wood to burn. Or bees causing pollination. Or let's now think of human things.

Governments causing law and order in the land. Kings causing wars. And a part of that would be human choice is a second cause.

Right. Like a human willfully choosing 30 pieces of silver causing a crucifixion. Okay. So that's all you need to know just for now.

There are first causes. There is the first cause of God eternally. And then lots of second causes in time. Right. And the confession is saying God's first sovereign cause of his decree and his providence and his predestining all things and governing all things.

[29 : 48] It is saying that doesn't destroy the second causes. Right. Second causes down here.

Right. Second causes. It doesn't destroy those things but rather establishes them.

Right. That is to say that these second causes of fire and clouds and governments and kings. Right. These second causes are real.

But they're not an illusion. They belong to the creature. Our will is our will. But these things are only possible because God has first decreed and caused them to be.

Otherwise they couldn't even exist. Right. In fact, God uses these second causes to achieve his eternal decree.

They're not independent of him. They're not independent of him and separate from him as if like he just creates creation, steps back and all these things just happen on their own. No.

[30 : 47] He's still thoroughly sovereign over them and in them. But the relationship is that he uses second causes to achieve his purpose.

So God doesn't just kind of zap things, zap his decree into existence and it just starts happening in time. He doesn't use invisible strings. He doesn't use invisible strings in the universe and kind of puppeteers everything.

It's that he, God, decrees all things. He has his plan. Let's call it his plan in action when it actually happens in time.

So the crucifixion or I can see healing existing, right? Plan in action. But how does that come about?

Well, he uses second causes to bring that about.

[31 : 48] That's the means by which he achieves his will. So let's expand that even more. Here we go. Here we go.

So God is the first cause, but he uses lots of other things in creation to achieve his plan, his decree, right? So he's decreed rain will fall yesterday, right?

Last night. So he used clouds, second causes to achieve that. When fire burns, that's all in his decree, but he uses the fire, when wood burns, right?

But he uses fire to achieve that. When there's a war, that's all in God's decree and he uses kings to achieve that. When you are encouraged, when God wants your heart to be encouraged, he uses

people's words for that or he uses someone texting on WhatsApp.

That is God using second causes. And we see this throughout scripture, right? So think about Joseph. Genesis 50, 20. As for you, you...

[32 : 55] Did I get to write this down for you? I haven't even written it. Oh, yes. I have, yeah, yeah. Genesis 50, 20. See, as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive.

So do you see, God is the first cause, but he uses and intends the second cause of Joseph's brothers and their actions to achieve his eternal purpose of saving lives.

Or think about Isaiah. We thought about this in the very first week. Assyria, the rod of my anger, the staff in their hands is my fury.

So Assyria's actions, like the staff in their hands is really God's intended fury, right?

So God used the second cause of Assyria to bring judgment on Israel. They were the second cause he used. And think about the cross. This Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of all his men.

[34 : 02] So God intended all of this. And he used the second cause of the Pharisees' hearts and their choices, their free choices, what they wanted to do. And Pilate's governing and his judgment, he used all of that to achieve his eternal decree of Christ saving sinners.

And that is how we can get a little bit closer to understanding God's eternal, how God's eternal decree relates to our choices and our hearts and our wills.

All these second causes are genuine, right? So let's think of, for example, cross, right? He uses people's hearts, Judas, Judas is free choice.

He uses that to achieve his decree. And all these second causes are genuine and real and our free will really does belong to us. And God uses these things to achieve his eternal decree.

And this is how we can understand both evangelism and prayer. I'm just going to quickly do this. I'm basically just going to state it and we can discuss afterwards, right?

[35 : 12] So look at Romans 10 in your little breakout box, right? Now, if God has eternally elected his people, right? He's got a people that he knows he's going to save.

That number cannot change, be lessened or added to. How does he actually save those elects in time? Well, Romans 10. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?

And how are they to believe in him of whom they've never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? So faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ.

James 1. Of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. So God doesn't just zap down salvation to his elect, right?

God uses the preaching of his word to call and save his elect. So God's given faith, right?

Sovereignly given from God comes through the hearing of the gospel.

[36 : 18] That is the second cause God uses, right? And so that is how we can understand why evangelism, right? As we preach here on Sundays, as we run Easter mission weeks, as the gospel goes out in Club 16 and ignites or hope explored, or we just share the gospel with neighbours.

That is how God saves his elect, right? That is the second cause God establishes and uses to achieve his eternal decree.

And it's actually an amazing privilege that we're seeing here. We genuinely become a part of God's eternal plan. And so think, why, the second question, why is God's sovereignty actually needed for prayer and evangelism rather than just negating it?

Well, without God's sovereignty, our evangelism would just be pointless. We couldn't raise the dead. We can't convince hard hearts. We can't release people from the slavery of sin.

But we can be assured that God can do that. In fact, God is the only one who can. We need him.

God's sovereignty means our evangelism and our preaching.

[37 : 34] It's actually worthwhile. God will call his elect through us. Let's just finish with prayer.

Because that is how we can also think about prayer. So just like God uses clouds to bring us rain, or Assyria to bring his judgment, or our preaching and words to bring salvation to his elect.

Well, God also uses our prayers to bring about his plan. Now, this is why James says, James 4.2, you do not have because you do not ask.

There's a genuine effectiveness to prayer. Prayer is the second cause, the means by which God achieves his eternal decree. And this is the reason why prayer works and is so powerful.

God uses our prayers. He actually uses them. He has said, I promise to hear the prayers of my people, to use those prayers and work through them to bring about my plan.

[38 : 43] So just because God has a plan doesn't mean we shouldn't pray. No, God has elected his people, but we should still preach the gospel. He commands us to preach, and so he commands us to pray as well.

And he uses both those things. In fact, we may ask, some people may ask, or when you think about the sovereignty of God, people may ask, well, if God is sovereign, why pray?

But really, we should ask, well, if God isn't sovereign, why should we pray? If he isn't sovereign, then there's no guarantee that he can answer our prayers or use them or do anything to help us.

There's no guarantee of the future at all. But God is sovereign. And graciously, he uses our prayer to achieve his eternal decree. And so this is the reason and confidence that you can have to pray.

He hears you. He wants you to pray. And he is able to answer because God is sovereign. Right. That was about 15 minutes worth in about two minutes.

[39 : 49] So you might have questions. We'll do a couple of minutes for questions on that. Thank you.