

The Sovereign God Controversy Ephesians 1

John 13:31-14:6

John 14:6-31

Psalm 139: 1-10

Let us go ahead and start out this morning by reading the first chapter of Ephesians. (read Ephesians 1) Paul starts this letter in his typical fashion, in a sort of 3 part introduction and greeting. This was a very common style of starting a letter in that time, but Paul almost always interjects some theological truths in his opening greetings. Paul immediately identifies himself in this letter as an “apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.” Before getting into the purpose of his letter, he first establishes his credentials and calling as an Apostle of Jesus Christ, bringing attention to the official nature of this message. The term, or title of Apostle was a fairly limited used term in relation to followers of Jesus. The original 12, of whom Jesus called to join him in his earthly ministry were called Apostles, these were the 12 who were with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry, and were witnesses of his resurrection. In addition to those 12, Paul recognized and included Barnabas, James, the brother of Jesus, and Apollos as fellow Apostles.

There are few terms where Paul uses this terminology to describe someone as a messenger of the church, but the overwhelming instances of this terminology being used are to those who were specifically called and sent by Jesus himself. So, this title of Apostle carries with it a great sense of authority being identified as one who was sent by Jesus to be a messenger of his word. I have heard it argued that the defining factor in one being called an Apostle is they must have had a direct encounter with Jesus such as Paul on the road to Damascus. Paul even identified himself as an Apostle out of time, one who came later outside of the original 12. So there is a very urgent sense that when you got a letter from Paul, you listened up for he was a chosen messenger of God, as we see in the first line of verse one, his authority, and title as an Apostle is not self appointed but rather he says, is by the will of God.

The role of an Apostle in the early days of the Christian faith was to proclaim the gospel in both writing and speech. Establishing churches, having Authority in this purpose given by God to do these very things. And Paul is one such individual with the full weight of that authority. In some places of his writing Paul refers to his message as “my gospel” this was not a statement of arrogance, or even a claiming that the gospel of Christ was something he developed, but rather it was a statement of authority, that the truths he speaks are truths indeed, for he was God's messenger, given a revelation with wisdom and knowledge to share the things of God to the people. Which as we see in the second half of verse 1, is whom he is specifically writing to, “to the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus.” It is often important to establish who the author of a letter is writing to for it gives context and meaning in that writing which is one reason why we took the time last week to establish this. What we can gather from this greeting then, is that Paul has a certain Authority in writing this letter, so the things in which it contains can be both trusted, and listened to, and it is to the fellow believers that he writes, so this is not an outreach gospel message to the lost unbeliever, but a word of instruction and encouragement to fellow Christian brothers and sisters.

In this first chapter alone, the concept of God's will, and his purpose and choice appears 4 times. Verse 1 "Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God." Verse 5, "having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will." Verse 9" having made known to us the mystery of his will, according to the good pleasure of His will." and lastly verse 11 "In him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will."

So we can already see the theme that Paul is really going to be pushing here in this book, one of the specific pieces of the Christian life centered upon the knowledge of knowing God's will. There is a lot of talk today about the free-will of man, being able to choose and make our own decisions...in many ways this is a non-debated reality, we see this idea of free will even mentioned in our movies, and TV shows, and this concept seems to be intrinsically built into us as Americans. And there is a sense in which we have free will, if defined correctly as the ability to choose what we want..but it is the want that is the issue when it comes to God. Without an intervention from God, in other words his effectual calling, we are lost in our sins simply because we want to be. The nature of man is to please one self, to seek the better interest of one self, and even seemingly selfless acts serve to lift up, and promote self. Everything in our being is intrinsically drawn to this concept, it is displayed as the motivator in our actions, and colors our thoughts.

That is why scripture refers to salvation as the new birth, for through Christ we become new creatures. That is not to say that the old self goes away, but we are given the Holy Spirit to help us, to guide us, convict us of those sinful motivations, actions, and thoughts. Without the work of Christ in us, without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we really have no knowledge of how bad we truly are. As is written in the book of John, chapter 6:44 "No one can come to me unless the father draws him." This shows that salvation is a simple choice dependent on mankind's ability, or willingness, but rather it is God's sovereign drawing power. The father's call is the catalyst for belief. This call is a gentle, loving irresistible calling, which awakens our hearts and minds to desire the things of God. Turning our natural bent and desire to please self, to look instead to please God.

Jesus solidifies this reality further down in chapter 44 of the book of John, when he says, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the father." Until we are given the ability to truly see and understand God, which is a gift from the father, to know Christ, we will remain lost in our sins. But once we have been given this gift, to see God as he truly is, and ourselves as we truly are, it will always work in us repentance and love toward the one who has forgiven us of so much. While God initiates this drawing process, calling whom he wills, it is man who responds with faith and repentance, and Jesus says, those who do so, "I will raise up in the last day." There is no chance in our salvation, it is sure, guaranteed, all those who are called according to the purpose and will of God, will come to him, and will be raised up in the last day.

But that calling goes beyond salvation, it is a major part of our Christian lives as well, as we are called to be witnesses, we share the hope that we have, this guaranteed hope of salvation through Christ. So that others may hear, and others may know, and that God may use us in the work as he draws more and more people to him. We each have a role to play in our lives, and Paul recognized his role as an Apostle of Jesus Christ, called into that role by the sovereign will of God. And his letter is likewise addressed to these chosen Saints who by God's own will, by his own grace and mercy have come to know him through Jesus. Paul refers to the recipients of his letter as saints, this is not a comment on their morality, or goodness as we often use the term today.

But it is a comment on their status before God, they are saints because they are the set apart ones, the chosen ones by God, who has given them grace and mercy in the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. And these have turned from their sins, and believed becoming God's people, a part of his holy nation of priests he is building. So Paul, the chosen Apostle of God, is writing a letter to the set apart, chosen saints in Ephesus, and by extension us today as we read his words these 1000's of years later. God in his infinite wisdom has allowed the writings of his Apostles, his prophets, and others to carry on through generations, so that we may know him by his word, so that we may read these accounts of those who walked with him, with those who talked with him, so we may by their lives, learn of him and know him ourselves. The revelation of who God is, is in these words, we are shown through the life of Jesus who the father is. As Jesus said, to Phillip as recording in the gospel of John, which we read this morning, When Phillip said, "show us the father and we will believe, it will be sufficient for us!" And Jesus said, "Have I been with you for so long, and yet you have not known me? He who has seen me has seen the father, so how can you say, Show us the father?"

The Apostles got to learn of God, and see God through Jesus, and we the same vicariously through their accounts and words. The only way we have to know God, is by his word, through these written accounts of the prophets, and Apostles. There is no faith without these words, and one can not truly understand without the holy spirit's insight and guidance. The Jews in the days of Jesus and the Apostles rejected these words, rejected the message of the messiah which was sent and as you read through scripture you see that rejection becomes their downfall. One can have a belief in God, and not yet have a saving faith, for one must be in Christ. The rejection of Jesus and the cross is a rejection of God. And these words are the account of God's redemptive work through Jesus so that we may know him and understand ourselves and our need for the messiah.

So we can, as Paul includes in his greeting in verse 2, receive the grace and peace from God the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ. We as believers are the recipients of such grace in the forgiveness of our sins, that the holy one would lay down his life for us, is a mercy and grace beyond compare. Therefore in Christ, we have can have peace knowing that this one of which the prophets foretold has come and paid the price for our sins, so that we may be forgiven. This charge and grace and peace from Paul was quite common in his letters to the churches, and was a variation of the standard Hellenistic greeting, which was changed to bring to the forefront the mercy and glory of God. Both in the Greek, and Jewish forms of greeting it was common to employ a phrase such as, "peace to you" but Paul takes it a step further and points to God, who has brought us peace through his son.

Paul writes this letter so that his readers may learn a deeper understanding of these two truths that we have in Christ, his grace, and the peace of which it gives. In verse 3 we find this to be true as Paul breaks into a declaration of this blessed grace and mercy, the blessings that God has given his saints, as he writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. Paul is pushing his readers to meditate upon what God has done for them, this giving of the spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, referring to the salvation that has been given to us by Jesus himself. The fact that the most high God, creator, and king, has by his own purpose and will, sent his Son so that we the accursed offspring of Adam may know him. There is no greater blessing then this, to know God, to believe God, and the rest in the righteousness laid to our account by his Son. It is this reality that shapes the lives of God's people, moving us to be likewise full of grace and mercy toward one another, and the world around us.

As we went through the book of Romans we talked a lot about this reality, our “reasonable service” that is pretty much expected of believers. Christ was given not only for the remission of our sins, but also as our example to strive for. As I have said, over and over again from this pulpit, the law that was given is no longer the rule and guide for God's people, it is Christ, through the conviction and guidance of the holy spirit. If you want to know how we are to live as Christians in this world, look to Christ. If you want guidance in this Christian walk, read his word, read the accounts of those who followed him, learn from his teachings. The faith that we have been given and our conduct as Christians flows out of a heart changed by God, and since it flows outward from a work done by God, the necessity of the outward physical guidance is no longer necessary. Therefore when Jesus says, Love the Lord your God with all you heart, and love your neighbors as yourself and this is the fulfillment of the law...he is not merely changing the law, but is showing it has been fulfilled through him, for the love we are to have for one another is flowing not out of a necessity to do good things, but our of a pure love of God which flows through his children.

It is a supernatural, God given love that has been given to us, and we as his children, born in this grace and mercy, naturally reflect this love, for we the children of God inherit the traits of our father, the one who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Think on that a minute, where you are today, all that you have, your job, your family, your house, your life, has all been given to you as a blessing from the almighty father. Is it perfect, of course not.. we live in a fallen sin sick world in which has a corrupting effect, but that does not change the reality that without God we would have nothing. This reality should change our outlook on what we have, cause us to appreciate what God has given..we tend to look outward and see things we desire, or want, instead of praising God for what he has given us. Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, chapter 4 verse 11. “Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am in, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound, everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Paul understood this reality that all things come from God, and even our times of need, even our times of struggle are given so that we may know him more, rest in him more, and learn to trust in him more. We have the example of Job, who had lost everything, yet he trusted and believed God, for he also knew that apart from God we have nothing. So, we learn to rejoice in what God has given, we learn to be content with what God has allowed, and even in hardship, and loss we look to God who is rich in mercy and grace. We serve an all knowing, all powerful sovereign God, there is no accidents, mishaps or mistakes, all things are for is glory, the blessings in good times, and the faith in difficult times all belong to God who is rich in his mercy toward us. One of the major issues in the church today is they do not see God to be as big, or as powerful and he truly is. As RC Sproul said, “If there is one maverick molecule in all of the universe. Then God is not sovereign, and if God is not sovereign, he is not God” Even the molecules obey him and are exactly where he wills. The bible expressed this truth by stating God knows the hairs on your head, he knows your waking up and your lying down, he knows the stars in the heavens, and the sand in the seas.

So if we truly believe that God is God, that he is who he says he is, he does indeed have the power that he claims that he has, then these next few verses lose all controversy. Verse 3.” Just as he chose us 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, to the praise and glory of his grace by which he made us accepted in the beloved.

If God is God, then he is sovereign over your will, If God is God, out of his creation he may chose as he desires, and there is nothing we mere humans, the ones he has created can do about it. This letter to the Ephesians had a profound effect on my own life and my own faith. By the teaching in this book I came to understand that it was God who was in control, not my will, not my desire, but God. And that I would not be here where I am today if it was not for him, I would still be lost in my sins if it were not for him. This doctrine should not be as controversial as it is, but it is because of man's pride, and arrogance that we can not just simply bow down before God and say, "not my will, but yours oh Lord." If God knows the sands in the sea, the stars in the sky, then he knows you, intimately, and completely, and it is he alone who has the ability to break through our blindness, the darkness in our lives, the sin the separates us from him, and open you heart and mind to truly know him. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

God has given us the greatest gift, his son, so that we may know him, so that we may believe, and that we may find rest knowing that this almighty sovereign God, is for us.. not against us, he who has chosen us as his adopted children will never turn his back on us. If he has given us his son, to die for his beloved children, will he not provide for us in all that we need? Even in sickness and in death, he provides the outcome...in humanities darkest experience we believers have hope, for that separation from this life, is presence with our father. A hope that defies human understanding, a supernatural hope, given by a supernatural sovereign God. If you don't know God today, and you hear his call, don't wait, don't put him off, run to him in repentance and find the forgiveness you need, those who is faithful to confess their sins he will by no means cast out. Our God is a mighty sovereign God, who is willing and able to wipe clean the lists of offense we carry, trust him, love him, obey him, believe him, and rest in him, the one who holds the stars in the palm of his hand, likewise holds his children close to himself so that he may never lose one. Repent, believe, and rest in the everlasting arms of this sovereign father, who works all things for his glory, according to his good pleasure, who loves and chose you.