

God's Decision vs Man's Decision

by Rolfe Barnard

The gospel calls on men to respond to God's saving action, and human decision is necessary for salvation.

Duration: 40:58

Scripture: John 20:27, Hebrews 4:11, Hebrews 6:4-6, Hebrews 10:29, Hebrews 12:15, Hebrews 12:25

Topics: "Election And Predestination", "Repentance And Faith"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes that the gospel is more than just information about God's saving action in Jesus Christ. It is the proclamation of the facts of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension, as well as His present reign. The preacher warns of the danger of preaching the gospel as mere information, stressing that it is a message that confronts individuals with God's actions and demands. The sermon also addresses the relationship between God's decision of election and man's responsibility for repentance and faith, cautioning against falling into the extremes of hardshellism or extreme free willism. Overall, the sermon emphasizes the importance of preaching the gospel as the making known of God's saving acts and the exhortation to repentance and faith.

Transcript

In this message today, in which I try my dead level best to be of help to any young preacher who may be familiar with this tape, I wish to pick up the very difficult problem that every preacher faces, and he must face it. Namely, the problem of how to preach in the light of God's decision of election, of son to salvation, and man's decision. There are problems here that we must not ignore, and everyone who sets out to be a preacher of the gospel of God's grace to lost men and women must not, need not dealt this problem.

It is age old, but it is a very serious problem. We have in the scripture the fact that God has chosen us in him from before the foundation of the world. We find in the Old Testament the election of a nation, and in the New Testament the election of individuals unto salvation.

There is tremendous danger that we go overboard and preach God's decision in election in such a way as to make unnecessary man's response, man's belief, man's repentance. There is another danger that we face, and that is to make man's decision a component part of salvation. In other words, the age old controversy of synergism alongside our cooperation with God's decision.

That cannot be so, and we have to find in our preaching a third way, not that God's decision renders unnecessary man's decision, and not that man's decision is a help to God and a component part, a

contribution to his salvation. But there is a third way, and that happens to be the Bible way, and we want to discuss it, if we may, and ask you to be very tedious as you listen to us, and I hope that you'll listen to this tape over and over again, and the one on the other side where I deal with the problem of preaching the cross. These messages, this one and the next one, are rather heavy, and they require a good deal of study.

I do not ask you to agree with them, but I do hope you'll study them. This age old problem, then, that has been the center of controversy for so many, many centuries of time, namely, does God's decision render void man's response, and does man's response make a contribution to salvation, or is man's decision an acknowledgment of the fact that salvation is by grace? Now, my friends, we must preach the gospel. The gospel must be preached.

We must preach the gospel. I'm reminded of that scripture that comes from the heart of the Apostle Paul, as recorded in 1 Corinthians 9, verse 16, where he says, Woe is me if I preach not the gospel. He's not simply saying, I wish I could be a preacher, but he's saying, Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.

Here is the unavoidable. This is not a painful burden to Paul, but an order which he fulfills with gladness. The significance of the preaching of the gospel, according to the apostolic practice, is beyond any doubt.

The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is not merely a fact from the past, but, thank God, it's a fact of the present. And the proclamation of this revelation of God in Jesus Christ is a message that must be preached now. The Apostle Paul, for instance, in chapter 10 of the book of Romans, says, Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

But who then shall call upon him whom they do not believe? And how shall they believe him unless they have heard about him? And how shall they hear of him except there be once a preacher? And how shall one preach except he be sent? And how beautiful are the feet of them who bring glad tidings of salvation. Whatever else we do, my young preacher friend, God help us never to lose our fire and our fervency here. Let this text of the Apostle Paul burn within our souls.

Woe is me if I preach not the gospel. Nothing, absolutely nothing, and especially this is true in our day, must be allowed to rob us of the absoluteness of Christ as Lord and Savior. Especially in this day when the old so-called even-dead religions are fighting back with so much impetus.

Let us never lose sight of the fact that Jesus Christ is absolute. He is the only Lord. He is the only Savior.

And we must share Paul's fervency here that there is no salvation in any other. That salvation is utterly in the Lord Jesus Christ. I am approaching our difficult problem today.

Let me make two or three statements and then give you an outline of what I have proposed to handle. For your help I trust this very difficult problem of God's decision and man's decision. The gospel, my friends, is more than making known some facts to be accepted or rejected.

Or maybe I should say that the preaching of the gospel, the proclamation of the gospel, is more than just relating some facts that men are asked to accept or reject. But the preaching of the gospel carries within it a call from God and a demand from a living God. In the proclamation of the gospel God is not a bystander.

He is not a disinterested observer. But in the preaching of the gospel, God is active. And in the gospel, God in Christ confronts man with his actions and his demands.

Therefore the proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, and that's the only way it can be proclaimed, brings men feast to feast with the living God in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now I wish to consider three facts or three things in seeking to help you in the matter of rightly relating God's decision of election and man's response of repentance and faith, lest we fall into the trap of hardshellism on one hand and extreme freewillism on the other. And the first thing I'm going to say, I'll mention the three and then we'll take them up in detail.

First, the gospel is, I said it's more than, but it is the making known and the proclamation of God's saving action toward this world in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is more than that, but it is that. It is the proclamation of some facts of the fact of a saving God in action in the life and the death and the resurrection and the ascension and the present reign of his glorious Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, this action of God that we have proclaimed comes to man in the form of a message that is full of exhortation to repentance and faith and with terrible warning of the fatal consequences of unbelief, refusal to bow to the demands of this call from God. So that introduces us in the third place to the place and nature of repentance and faith or man's decision in relation to God's decision. And this forms the heart of our problem in preaching.

Let me go over that again. The gospel is the making known. It's more than that, but it is that.

The making known and proclamation of God's saving action. This world must hear what God has done and is doing toward sinful man's salvation. But this saving action of Almighty God that we proclaim in the gospel doesn't come to man as a bunch of facts, but it comes in the form of a message that is full of exhortation from Almighty God to men to repent and believe.

And also it comes with terrible warning of the fatal response of unbelief. And that leads us to the place and nature of man's repentance and faith or to the place of man's decision in relation to God's eternal decision of election. And this forms the very heart of our problem in preaching the gospel to lost men and women.

Let us in some tedious detail take up these three truths. First, preaching the gospel is making known the fact of God's saving action. But before we say another word, young man, let me remind you there is tremendous danger here.

Preaching the gospel is not simply information about a given state of affairs. Now, I want you to get me here. We can preach as if, let me use an illustration.

Somebody in my reading has used the invitation about a city that has been captured, and the invading army has already come and captured the city, and the inhabitants of the city have thus been delivered. They have been prisoners. But although the city is in the hands of the conquering army, the news of the conquering has not gone out.

And so they send out heralds to tell people of what has already taken place. They are afraid that they don't know it. Now, there is danger here.

We can get into the business of just relating the facts of God's election and what happened on the cross and in the infatuation at the right hand of God, in such a way as to fall into the trap of preaching either that God in election actually has saved everybody and they just need to find out about it, or that some have been saved. That only some have been saved. And the first thing we know, we'll be dead in our hearts and we'll proclaim the gospel simply as a bunch of facts, and we'll not understand that we must proclaim God's

decision in action, but in the Bible, such proclamation bears a wholly different character than that of informative declaration concerning a given state of affairs.

Now, we do insist that we are to preach the great facts of God's saving action of salvation. But, my friends, it's not simply just a matter of fact, a relation of facts. It comes not just to give us some data about a given state of affairs, so that we can become either universalists and say salvation has already been accomplished for everybody, or we can preach that election is salvation instead of unto salvation.

The Apostle Paul is clear here. We can see that this is evident from the manner in which Paul speaks of the made known of the mystery. This was kept secret for long ages of time, in Romans 16 and 25.

According to the command of the eternal God, it is made known, this mystery is now made known, to bring about obedience to the faith. Obedience to the faith. And when Paul writes that God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of this mystery, in Colossians 1, verse 27, you'll see it.

He adds, him we proclaim, warning every man in all wisdom that we may present every man mature in Christ. He makes some facts known, him we proclaim, God's saving action in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says, I make that known, but I also do something else.

I warn every man in all wisdom that we may present every man mature in Christ Jesus. Therefore, God's declaration is united with and directed to this proclamation of making some facts known and warning men. Now, it is true that our message is a making known.

It is not, however, simply a gentle admonition. Our message involves the preaching, the making known of the great deeds of God, the proclamation, the sounding force of that wondrous event of what God has now done in Jesus Christ. It is a matter of history, not a matter of myth.

It means, therefore, that those who preach it are preachers, they are heralds, they are ambassadors of the salvation which has appeared. And these, they are ambassadors of facts, they are telling people facts. But they are facts concerned with God's reconciling action toward men and women everywhere.

That leads us to our second point, that this message of the making known of the saving acts of Almighty God and the Lord Jesus Christ comes to us more than just some relation of facts, but it comes to man in the form of a full exhortation to faith and the faithfulness of unbelief. Therefore, we are lifted above the level where the difference between knowing about what has already been accomplished and not knowing of things. For although the making known of the proclamation leads from not knowing to knowing, this transition takes place in the way of exhortation and faith.

The coming of the kingdom does not make the human response superfluous, but rather urges its necessity with utter seriousness. We see this clearly in the preaching of John the Baptist. According to Matthew 3 and 1, he proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven had come near.

He said he was the herald of this kingdom, this rule, which through Jesus Christ broke in upon the world. And he called men to repentance precisely then when God's redemptive activity began. When Christ made manifest the fulfillment of the prophecy, in Matthew 4, beginning you read verse 14, for several verses, when he made manifest the fulfillment of this prophecy, he began at the same time his proclamation of the kingdom.

He said in verse 17, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The preaching of his disciples and the message of this kingdom that has come near, and the signs that accompany its coming, can be understood only in the light of the mystery of its fulfillment. It is this message that demands decision wherever it is brought.

For instance, we read in Matthew, as you enter the house, the Lord said, salute it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.

Matthew 10, verses 12 and 13. The gospel, according to the Lord, must be proclaimed from the housetops. Matthew 10, verse 27.

And which preaching is, since Christ being received again into heaven, a proclamation that is directed to all nations and all men. In this universality, the loftiness of the message comes to the forefront in its demand to be acknowledged and believed. We are to make disciples of all nations.

Thus the preaching is not an empty word which is imparted, but which has no effect. It calls for decision and acceptance and faith. These truths are brought out clearly in the gospel of Luke.

In chapter 24, when the Lord Jesus opens the scriptures for his disciples. We read there, thus it is written, that Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. Now, notice carefully something here.

This does not mean a change in the content of the message. It doesn't mean a change of preaching from the salvation which God has prepared to repentance. No, the message is that Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead.

That's the proclamation. Those are the saving facts. But note that although repentance is not part of the gospel, it is closely connected with the preaching of it.

You see the deep connection there that exists between the salvation, which Christ says has appeared on the one hand, and repentance and faith on the other. The proclamation, therefore, of the message is a message to be preached, but it is a preaching in which the loftiness of God's redemptive action calls on men to acknowledge this salvation as not something they can add to or help God bring about, calls on men to acknowledge this salvation as God's gift. This, I think, explains why the scriptures over and over emphasize the great simplicity, the utter decisiveness of God's action, and on the basis of this, the need of the believing acceptance of it.

When Paul, therefore, will write in 2 Corinthians 5, verses 18 and 20, do you reconcile with God? Immediately after, he's been speaking about the message of the ambassadors concerning God who was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. You see the connection. It's quite clear that the burden of these passages is neither one of human cooperation, nor one concerning the unimportance of the human decision.

There is, therefore, a third way that is here indicated, not that God's decision settles everything and man's response is not necessary, not that man can cooperate with God, not that man's response helps God, but that man's response is utterly important. And the third way of arriving at this is here indicated. It is the way of faith which gives God the glory in the acknowledgement that salvation is exclusively his gift.

Now, my friends, in this connection, the seriousness of unbelief becomes fully evident. Christ has come, and since he has come, the rejection of Christ is set forth in all of this terribleness. I think we can go so far as to speak of the enigma of unbelief here on the background of the urgent admonition and the door that has been opened.

The enigmatic character of unbelief does not, for Mark, arise from the sinfulness of man, but from the marveling of Jesus about the unbelief he finds in Nazareth, where he could do no mighty work, Mark 6, 5, and 6. Our Lord Jesus Christ could not understand, he could not comprehend this unbelief, this unbelief as to he has taught. He cannot fathom the astonishment about his power and his wisdom, which fills the hearts of his hearers, but which is not followed by faith. The men of Nineveh, the Lord says, will arise at the judgment with this generation, that one.

For they, the men of Nineveh, repented when Jonah preached to them, and Jesus says, Behold, someone greater than Jonah is here. He says, As Jonah became a sign to the men of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation, Luke 11. The preaching of Christ is a sign, a sign that shall be spoken against, that he is set for the fall and the rising of men, Luke 2.34. Precisely in the time of redemptive fulfillment, the preaching of Christ is a sign that shall be spoken against, sets off forever the way to relative eyes, the human decision, because of the grace of God.

Now, in these words of our Lord, and the danger of synergism, that's cooperation, God does some and you do the rest. When the danger of synergism is seen working in them, it might be easier to proceed with the process of relativizing and to do so with an appeal to the tribe of grace and a necessity of faith. But then, injustice is done to the message of salvation, which does not call on men to cooperate, but it calls on men to acknowledge and believe.

Now, he said two things. First, the gospel, the preaching of the gospel is the declaration of, the proclamation of God's saving action in the Lord Jesus Christ. We said that this proclamation is not simply the relation of some facts.

We said that it comes in the form of a message calling on men to respond and warning men of the awful, awful danger of unbelief. Against the background of the sovereignty of God's grace, however, the Bible leaves room and demands human decision. This human decision, the decision of faith, to which the message calls, never bears a competing character through which God's salvation is deprived of its sovereign character.

I wish I could burn that in you, young preacher, in these awful days where we've taken salvation out of the hands of God and made it sort of a mutual pact between God and man. Here we see the depth and the mystery, and there is depth and mystery, of the way to get together God's decision and election and man's response and repentance and faith. The mystery of this relationship between faith and salvation lies precisely in this, that this faith, which does not compete, however, is absolutely necessary and saves, and that, therefore, we are called to the acceptance of faith.

When the sovereign character of God's salvation is obscured by the cooperative character of faith, when we face the dangers and necessity of faith, the warning against unbelief can lead to preaching that faith is a component, even the decisive component, of salvation. On the other hand, if we react the other way, if we so react to synergism, that we can relativize the human decision and thereby prejudice the seriousness and the simplicity with which Scripture speaks about the necessity of faith. Faith is not a substitute for works.

The old reformers hammered at that. Faith is not a new mold of these works. This is something you need to think through, my young friend, as you make faith a work.

But although there is danger here, we must not lose sight of the fact that the Scriptures call men to repentance and warn men of the awful seriousness of unbelief. Here, we can't rationalize, we can't be logical. The way must be kept open by the work of the Holy Spirit.

He is the true source of faith. For that faith, which is not a second mystery alongside of the mystery of God's saving reconciling essence, but which, filled with this mystery, praises the grace of God and therefore saves. The problem, therefore, of belief and unbelief is utterly profound.

All of our preaching on this subject must therefore have as its point of departure the fact that according to the word of God, God's salvation is a sovereign salvation. That in the most absolute sense of the word, if God's salvation comes from him and not from us, that it stems from his divine good pleasure alone. At the same time, we see that in terms of the proclamation of his salvation, the human answer, the human reaction, is not without significance.

The Bible constantly calls to faith and warns in the most serious terms against unbelief. Notice three or four scriptures along this line. When our Lord Jesus was risen from the dead, he explained to Thomas in John 20, verse 27, he says to Thomas, Be not unbelieving, but believing.

This is the admonition that runs through the whole of the New Testament. We can hear it clearly in the book of Hebrews when in persecution and distress the church is warned against unbelief and against failing to obtain the grace of God. Chapter 12, verse 15.

When we hear the word of God warning us against refusing him who is speaking. Verse 25 of chapter 12. When we are warned against following the example of disobedience.

Chapter 4, verse 11. When we are warned against the falling away of those who have been enlightened. Chapter 6, verses 4 and 6. And when in sharp language and with a threat of punishment against the sin of him who has spurned the Son of God and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified.

Outrage the spirit of grace. Chapter 10, verse 29. The biblical antithesis between belief and unbelief makes clear that faith is never a human achievement or merit.

The call to faith does not exclude but it includes that our faith is directed to Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. Precisely this is the peculiar character of faith. Of the whole structure of the activity of faith.

That it involves a truly human deed. And that this deed is not swallowed up by the overpowering might of God's grace. But that precisely as a human deed it is wholly full of and is entirely directed to the gospel of God's grace.

Faith as a component in salvation is heresy. And yet we are warned of the seriousness and the danger of unbelief. My friends, it would seem that the Bible speaks very clearly about the tremendous power and dynamite of unbelief.

The scriptures warn against unbelief. But often emphasis is laid on significant relations which receive a place in the admonition. This comes in a very striking manner in the book of Hebrews where in chapter 4

verse 2 we read these words.

For the gospel of good news came to us just as to them but the message which they heard did not benefit them because it did not meet with faith in the hearers. This is a very remarkable and important passage because in it the relationship between faith and the preaching of the gospel is very clearly indicated. Yet it is certain that the writer of Hebrews does not refer to a meritorious function of faith.

He is not a pre-Pelagian Pelagius. Nor are we face to face with the words of a synergist, a man who wants man to cooperate with God. We do find here the components involved in the tremendous dynamic of the encounter between the proclamation of the gospel and its hearers.

These words just do not leave room for the view that the decision of God makes God the decision of man. We see rather the components that are involved in the full light of concrete reality. We hear about the proclaimed word which was heard but which was not profitable.

Because it was not accompanied by faith. The word did indeed sovereignly reach the hearers in accordance with the divine mandate to preach the gospel. But there was no profit, no benefit.

Why? In unbelief. In the dark recesses of the unbelieving human heart it broke off. This fact is taken with full apostolic seriousness.

The New Testament speaks of belief. And unbelief as a choice. A serious, if you will, a decisive choice.

Whatever the judgment as to the dogmatic place of belief and unbelief, we will in any case have to take as our point of departure the seriousness with which the New Testament takes the human response to the preaching of the gospel. As I'll have a passage of scripture here in Hebrews in addition to this very important one, Hebrews 4 and 2 that I want to come back to in a moment, but in 2 Thessalonians, I beg your pardon, it's not in Hebrew, 2 Thessalonians 2, verse 13, we have here the expression, Paul notes that he is so thankful for those people for when they heard the gospel preached by him, they took it as the word of God, which it really was, not as the words of men. And the word of God, believe, is effectual, he says.

Here he says that he thanks God continually, because as he says, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, this is 2 Thessalonians 2, verse 13, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. Here the word, entirely different from Hebrews 4 and 2, the word was preached in both places in one place, people didn't believe. But here it is believed.

Here the word was united with faith, and in this way it is effective. We must leave room here for the full message of the scriptures, and for the concrete components of the dynamic involved in the meeting between the proclaimed word of God and man's reaction to it. The thought expressed in Hebrews 4 and 2, I'll return to that in just a minute, is remarkable, and I want to say just another word about it.

Here the necessity of faith as an act of the hearer comes to the fore. The word must not only be heard, it must also be received in faith. This verse speaks of a calling as an urgent admonition so that the proclamation may be profitable and effective in the way of salvation.

Against the background of the salvage sovereignty of God's grace, the Bible does demand human decision. This human decision never competes, but it is necessary, and it's saved. Now, this has been a

somewhat technical and tedious message, but in it I have tackled one of the great problems of preaching.

And I'm so anxious that you'll study it, my dear young preacher, and that you'll come out with your feet solidly on the truth that salvation is the sovereign work of a holy God, that faith does not make a contribution, but faith, like a hand stretched out, receives the gift of God's salvation and humble acknowledgment that it does come from God, that God is always a giver, and man is just a receiver. In the name of God, I trust that no one by listening to me should turn out to be a cold-blooded reciter of facts to be accepted or rejected. God, give us some of the unction of the Holy Ghost as we proclaim the saving acts of God and Jesus Christ, that in our voices the Holy Spirit will be able to put the note of a serious call to man to respond in repentance and faith and a serious note of warning of the terrible dangers of falling into the hands of a living God whose Lord you have despised, whose gospel you've not believed, whose invitation you've not accepted.

God bless you. As you come, I believe, under God the need of this hour is to preach salvation by grace, with our hearts breaking, with tears flowing from our hearts in the unction power of the Holy Ghost, forever proclaiming what God has done and what he is doing, but not making the acts of men a part of salvation, and on the other hand, not just announcing some facts that men can in their head receive and accept, but calling on men everywhere to repent toward God and bow to the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, I'm anxious that you'll turn to the other side of this tape, where I'll bring an introductory message on the preaching of the cross.

Following that introductory message, we're going to have some several teaching messages on the message of the cross of Jesus Christ. God bless you, everyone. Amen.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/1/SID1497.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/rolfe-barnard/gods-decision-vs-mans-decision/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net