

God is on the Throne and in Control

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God's Sovereignty

The topic assigned to us today is under the caption, 'God is on the throne and in control'. To introduce our theme, we are now to read the words that express the experience of the great monarch, Nebuchadnezzar, the rebuilder of Babylon city. When his mind had cleared from its previous aberrations, he came to express what he had learned of the living God.

At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honoured him who lives for ever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?' (Dan 4:34–35)

We are to be concerned, not so much with God's majesty and holiness but with his sovereignty: the fact that God is on the throne of the universe and is in ultimate control. This is an exceedingly glorious fact, calculated to inspire great comfort and courage in the hearts of God's people amidst all the challenges of life, the world's instabilities and its fears. Whatever may be coming upon our world, the believer may rejoice with settled conviction that this is God's universe—God sits upon his throne and he is in ultimate control.

How may we know anything about God at all?

How is it that we can come to this conviction that God exists, that he is on the throne and in ultimate control? The brief answer to that question is that we do not start, as some say, from the bottom upwards; we start from the top down. That is to say, when we think about God and what he may be like, we don't start with our own ideas and begin to philosophize and argue on the basis of this bit of evidence and that bit of evidence. That is what the ancient Greek philosophers did and a good many people still do today.

We don't start from the bottom up, trying to find our way through our minds and imaginations to what God may be like. We start from the top down. The glorious truth is that the God who lives in light unapproachable, whom no man has seen nor can see, has not waited for us to find him; he has come to find us. That is a glorious fact worthy of many a hallelujah. 'No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him' (John 1:18 KJV). We know about God because God has made himself known to us.

There is only one God

It stems, in the first place, from this glorious foundational fact that *there is only one God*. He is 'the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords' (1 Tim 6:15). There is one God. This topic had to be constantly addressed in the ancient world where men and women had lost their grip on the knowledge of the one true God, and didn't like to retain him in their minds. Having rejected the one true God, they found they could not believe in nothing, so they had to invent all kinds of gods.

They looked around on the forces of nature: the wind, the storm, the sun, the moon. They decided that they were gods, and they deified the forces of nature. They felt great powers working in their own hearts and minds: the power of sex, the power of aggression, the power of hope. They made gods out of them too and worshipped them. They believed in a multitude of gods, with devastating results. Based on people's imagination and deification of the forces of nature, these 'gods' were constantly at war with one another. One man got angry against this man here and another man got angry against him; the others were friends, so which side did they take? This god favoured the Romans, this god favoured the Greeks, Venus liked the Trojans, Athene liked the Athenians. The gods themselves were in conflict, and there was little hope of peace for ordinary human beings. They had a multitude of gods, then, and it brought uncertainty, distress and bewilderment, not to speak of slavery.

There were some who thought about life and saw that there are good things; and then they saw that there are also evil things. They decided there are two gods, two ultimate forces in the universe, the good god and the bad god, and they are in constant conflict with one another. Sometimes one becomes superior, then the other, but the contest will never be resolved. They are two equal powers, the power of good and the power of evil.

Thank God we have been delivered from such monstrosities of imagination. There are not many gods, there are not even two gods. 'For there is one God,' and as Christians, we add, of course, 'and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim 2:5). As for the basic intention of this one God, it is written clearly in Scripture, '[he] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (v. 4).

One God, then, and there is no unrighteousness in him (Ps 92:15). Here is the basis of our hope that one day all evil will be put down. He is in ultimate control and one day all his enemies shall be put beneath his feet (1 Cor 15:25).

There is only one creator

The sovereignty of God is also built upon the very foundational fact that this one God is *the sole creator*. We need to get hold of that. In our modern day, when people turn from Christianity and the true God, they're inclined towards mysticism and Hinduism, towards this, that, and the other, and they come across philosophies that teach that the great, supreme God is not the creator. They call him the world soul or the great spirit. He is so absolutely pure that he would never have dreamed of creating a world of matter, and still less of creating people with bodies like ours. It would be utterly beneath his dignity. The supreme God is not to be insulted by saying that he created us.

Well, then, how did the world and people come to be? The answer they give is that the supreme God created lesser gods, who also had creatorial powers, and they created still lesser gods. Somewhere down the line one of these lesser gods did this stupid thing and created matter and then human beings who are part soul and part matter. That was an unfortunate thing, and if we're wise we should make it our object in life to escape our material bodies and somehow or other get back into the world soul.

That's a lot of nonsense, and very degrading nonsense. I'm happy to tell you that you are not the product of some semi god. There is only one creator of all the forces in the universe, and he very deliberately created you. The Creator is not one of those forces; he's not even the biggest force. He's not in that category.

How did God make the universe?

Then we learn a marvellous thing. We are told that he made it through 'the second person of the Trinity' whom we call *the Word*.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:1-3)

For [in] him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities— all things were created through him and for him. (Col 1:16)

Three basic facts then; so let's try and get hold of them and their implication.

1. All things were made in him

If you come down the road and see some enormous factory, you might ask, 'where did this magnificent factory come from, where did it begin?'

Someone may say, 'it began when they came with their bulldozers and dug out the foundations.'

But that wouldn't be right, because it didn't begin there. It began in the mind of some businessman who decided he wanted to have a factory there, and what he wanted it for. It would have to be this shape and this size, and able to contain all his machinery. It began first of all in his mind, and then he probably called in an architect and got him to draw up the plans.

The Bible tells us that this vast universe was made by the word of God. 'By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible' (Heb 11:3). It was his idea. He conceived it, and not merely as a whole but in all its detail. It gives me great encouragement to remember that. You mightn't believe it, but I'm God's idea. Whose idea are you? Who thought you up? We are God's idea and were made in him.

2. All things were made through him

And who did he get to make the universe? Well, he didn't get anybody to make it; he made it himself. It is made through him.

3. All things were made for him

And what is the purpose of the universe and the purpose of life? The atheist says that there is no purpose. If you young folks listen to teachers who believe in evolution and are atheists, they will tell you that there is no mind, no intelligence, behind the universe.

If that's true, then there would be no ultimate plan, purpose or significance behind you. According to the atheist, you're just an accident that happened, and no more significant than a pot of jam that happened to fall on the ground. The grass got all mixed up with the jam, it's swept away and put into a hole, and that's what they'll do with you. There never was any purpose behind the universe, nor behind you either. What a miserable, bankrupt philosophy it is.

There is a purpose behind the universe, for the universe was not only made *in* him and *through* him, but *for* him.

What is the purpose of life itself?

Let's bring it down to practical matters. Sometimes I used to tease my students and ask them, what is life's *summum bonum*? What is its chief good? The ancient Greek philosophers used to think about this. They thought about all the multifarious activities that we get up to in life, the things we do, the schemes we have, and they asked themselves what all these schemes were for. What is the purpose of life itself? They said that the purpose of life itself must be something that you seek for its own sake—an end in itself, and never as a means to some other end. And if there are many things that you seek as ends in themselves, then the chief purpose of life must be the supreme end in itself. They called it the *summum bonum* in Latin.

That raises questions that we should ask ourselves. For instance, why do you go to work?

You say, 'Don't be so silly. I have to go to work to earn some money.'

Oh, I see. What for?

'I must go to work to eat.'

Why do you need to eat?

'To live, of course, and to be strong.'

Yes, you've got to be strong, I can see that. Why do you have to be strong?

'If I wasn't strong, I couldn't go to work.'

Wait a minute. You have to go to work to earn the money to get the food so that you can be strong and go to work? Sounds a little bit like going round in circles to me. Does it to you?

You say, 'No, there's more to it than that. I go to work to get the money, to get the food, to be strong; but I'm married and I've got children, so I have to get money to send them to school. They need a good education.'

Why do they need to go to school?

'If they don't go to school they won't be educated.'

And why is that important?

'They won't be able to get a good job.'

So you go to work to get the food to be strong to go to work to get the money to pay for your children to go to school, so that they can learn and go to work to get the money to get the food. It's going round in circles, isn't it? What is the whole thing about? What is it for?

Many folks are just going round in circles in life. When the employment gets short, the food restricted, or health declines, they've nothing to live for. God's answer to the universe, and to us within it, is that we were not only made in him and through him, but for him. What a glorious goal it is: we are made by the eternal Creator for the eternal Creator. Therein lies our significance, the anchor purpose of our existence. We're not meandering through life. We're made by God for a God who is eternal, and to know him is eternal life. 'And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (John 17:3). Good, isn't it?

God is the indisputable governor of the universe

Therefore, because he is the sole creator, he is the indisputable governor of the created universe. You will notice, please, that I said *indisputable*. I did not say he is the *undisputed* governor. Many have risen up to dispute God's sovereignty, but ultimately their disputes come to nothing. In the ultimate sense, his governorship of the universe is indisputable.

What Nebuchadnezzar learned about God

That is what Nebuchadnezzar learned, and what he was saying in the passage that we have read. He says, 'his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"' (Dan 4:34–35).

Notice that Nebuchadnezzar mentions two realms. He talks about 'the host of heaven' and then he talks about 'the inhabitants of earth'.

The Bible shows us that there are many lords, many princes, many kings, many rulers in the spirit realm. God rules his universe by delegating power to his creatures, so that in the heavenly realms, there are principalities, powers, might and dominions (Eph 6:12; Col 1:16). God holds indisputable, ultimate control over this army of heaven, 'He does according to his will.' He is not subject in any way to these great eminent powers. He made them and in the end he controls them.

Then Nebuchadnezzar talked about the inhabitants of the earth, and there too God is the King of kings and Lord of lords. There are many great powers on earth: kings, dictators, parliaments, and all the rest of it, and they are given delegated power by God. 'There is no authority except from God,' says Scripture (Rom 13:1). Ultimately, God is in control and his will shall be done. That is what Nebuchadnezzar is saying.

The prophet Isaiah, in his famous chapter 40, reminds us to look up now and again at the stars in all their vast multitudes. It's been one of the rejoicings of my heart in recent years to see the marvellous pictures from the Hubble Space Telescope, and to read about the discovery that at the edge of the universe there are billions of galaxies, each one of them with its billions of stars. It's good on a clear night to go outside in the dark and look up at the heavens, just to get earth's little things in proportion once again, and, as we think of their vast numbers, to remember their creator. If you now imagine it from God's point of view and put yourself up by his side looking down, we should seem very small, shouldn't we? When you fly in an aeroplane at 35,000 feet the great lorries look like Dinky toys, and people look like ants.

'Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlines like fine dust' (Isa 40:15). They're like the dust that's left over when the shop assistant has weighed the potatoes in the scales and tips them out. That's what it looks like to God.

We do well to get life in its true proportions, but isn't it wonderful to think that God loves us! We are so significant to God that we matter to him; so significant that our sin matters to him. In all our self-centredness, we should never forget the objective fact of the greatness of God, his indisputable governorship of the universe. It is the sovereignty of God, his unshakeable kingdom and throne, that has kept freedom alive for mankind in many generations. When men and women have believed that, they've found the courage to stand up against dictators whose power was almost absolute.

Nebuchadnezzar's golden image

The story of the three young men who defied Nebuchadnezzar sends a thrill into our hearts, doesn't it?

Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counsellors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. (Dan 3:2)

He was trying to enthrone in them some solidarity and get them all agreeing to support him. When the orchestra struck up, they were to bow down and worship the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 'Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace' (v. 6). 'If anybody doesn't serve my gods or worship the golden image, who is the god who will deliver him out of my hands?' (see v. 15).

Nebuchadnezzar's god was but a substitute for Nebuchadnezzar himself, of course.

So all the satraps bowed down until it came to these three young men. They stood before Nebuchadnezzar and defied him until he was filled with rage. They said,

O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up. (vv. 16-18)

Three cheers for men and women who have dared to stand against the godless dictators of this world. The young men were thrown into the furnace, and in the furnace they found the imperishable God. 'I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods', said Nebuchadnezzar (v. 25). They were walking in the flames with their bands untied. They found freedom through their faith in the sovereignty of God.

I was in the capital city of a former Soviet Republic a while ago, and found myself entertained by a whole bevy of professors of the university. Very elegant, gracious gentlemen they were, and a marvellous dinner they put on. You know how it is on these occasions, one thought

followed another, and the conversation went hither and thither. Some of these professors were telling me of the books they were publishing, and what great acceptance they were finding in America and in the United Kingdom. I think I must have forgotten where I was for the moment, and I said, 'In the bad old days, why did so many people kowtow to the totalitarian atheistic regime? Did many professors in the university bow down? It was like it in ancient Rome. Even the great and noble senators had to bow down to those boastful, would-be gods, the Roman emperors. How is it that intellectuals bow down?' There came a kind of an embarrassed silence, and I remembered where I was.

Men of the highest academic ability preached atheism to their students, and if their students didn't accept it they were thrown out. But, you see, if you have no faith in the living God, and if this little world is all you have, you will give everything you have to save your life, and become a slave to the next great dictator.

God began it all and he will have the last word

At the end of this age a dictator shall arise after that same mould, but he shall be unprecedented in his power. Every person except those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life shall bow down and worship him (see Rev 13:8). The secret of freedom is a faith in the sovereignty of God. There is a God, he is on the throne, and he will have the last word. Not only did God create the universe, and therefore he is sovereign in it, but he upholds it. Every moment, every second, every microsecond, he constantly upholds it. 'And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together' (Col 1:17).

Since Einstein we have learned that time is different according to what part of the universe you're in. A day on earth by earth time could be multimillion years in other parts of the universe. Time is relative. Gravity stretches time so that, for that reason too, time is not constant throughout the universe. But the Bible tells us that, however varied the workings of time are in different parts of the universe, he is before all things. Nothing happens that takes God by surprise, he never has to catch up with the news. That surely comes as a comfort to our individual hearts.

How do you know what's happened to your wife since you've been away? Is she still alive or not? You don't know, do you? Whatever has happened, good or bad, what a marvellous thing it is to know that, because God is before all things, everything has to have his divine permission before it happens.

He created the world: 'we understand that the universe was created by the word of God' (Heb 11:3). Genesis 1 is at pains to tell us at all stages throughout creation, it came to be as God said: 'and God said'; 'and God said'. Then Hebrews 1 tells us that not only were the worlds made by the word of God, but they are maintained by his word. He upholds all things by the word of his power, by his mighty word (see v. 3). Of course, he is sovereign; at the physical level his word is encoded throughout the whole of creation.

The young people present will know what I mean when I talk about 'information theory', but let me try and explain it so that non-scientists like me can understand it. The Bible says that the universe was made 'by the word of God'. That's interesting. He created it by a word

of command. 'Let there be light,' he said, 'and there was light' (Gen 1:3). He made it by his word because he has encoded his design into nature.

Let me take an illustration. A few of you ladies present may be just old enough to remember automatic washing machines in their early days. They were interesting things, but they would look very primitive now. They were sort of plastic containers with differently spaced notches down each side. If you wanted to do the linens, you had to have the linen programme. So you had a bit of plastic that you put into the right lot of notches and the old engine purred away happily and did your linens for you. When you'd done the linens and wanted to do the woollen things, you had a different programme. So you turned round the bit of plastic to a different lot of notches, and once more the machine happily purred away.

Now let me ask you a question. You're too young to have seen one of those machines, but I remember them. If I held up that bit of plastic in front of you and said, 'What is this?' you'd say, 'Well, it's plastic. That's all it is. It's plastic.'

You'd be right. It's made of plastic, through and through. But then you'd be wrong. It isn't just plastic, is it? What about those notches on the side?

'They're plastic,' you say.

Yes, I know, but they were put there at different intervals by the engineer. What did he put them there for? They are his way of telling the engine what to do. That's what the engineers mean by 'information'. They're carrying the information from the engineer to the engine in order to tell the machine what to do. Even while the machine is purring away and you are taking your morning coffee, the engineer is controlling your machine, making it do the coloureds and put out the soapy water, rinse the clothes and spin them dry. How's he controlling it? By the notches on the plastic; by the information they carry to the machine.

God is not subject to the laws of the universe

It's been one of the interesting discoveries of this last fifty years, that every cell in the human body contains chemicals called DNA and RNA, a fantastically complex set of chemicals. It's impossible to think that they are there by chance. Their function is to control the development of the human body from its conception and to supply all the material necessary, so that it comes together in the right order. It's no good having an eye if you haven't got a head to put it in. They determine the time period to the birth, and control the growth of that living organism until the day of its death. It's a marvellous bit of engineering. That's information theory for you. It's not only the DNA and the RNA in the cell, it's the cell itself that determines what kind of being or animal the foetus shall be.

God put it there; it is God's information theory. He not only made the universe by his word, he upholds it by his word. And when the Bible says that he upholds all things by his mighty word it's implying that, from time to time as he pleases, God puts in the necessary energy.

I'm waiting until I can find a physicist who will explain to me what energy is. I've asked them many times, but they seem to regard it as a stupid question. Perhaps it is! Until they can tell me what it is and where it comes from, I'm going to adhere to this, that God is the source

of energy and he upholds all things constantly by the input of his powerful word, 'the word of his power' (Heb 1:3). He not only upholds it, as though a man might stand and hold an enormously heavy weight; the Greek word implies that he carries it, and he's carrying it along to its destiny. He is the author and he knows the end of the story from the beginning. He has his purpose. Christ is the heir of all things; the heir, therefore, of our planet; the heir of its history and all the dividends of human progress. He shall inherit it all, for he made it, and made it for himself.

So let's now look in our imagination at the two great bogies that frightened the ancient world and made slaves of them. One was named *fate*, and the other was named *chance*.

Fate

There was supposed to be an all-powerful deity, whom the Greeks called Zeus, the Romans called Jupiter, and the Aramaeans called Ba'al; but even he was subject to fate. Fate was the mysterious power behind the universe that decided what everything would be. The decisions of fate were irresistible, and even the gods were subject to it.

You'll find the same notion among people who don't know the Lord. They'll sometimes say, 'Ah, well, what will be, will be; *que sera, sera,*' and all that nonsense. That's fate. People try to comfort themselves with it. Among the scientists you'll find people holding that same view. They say this universe is a system of cause and effect: absolute, invariable cause and effect. 'There is no room for a god to put his hand in,' they say. 'We can explain all the workings of the universe simply by cause and effect. There's nothing we can do about it and there's no room for God.' That's nonsense.

Of course, our universe works by cause and effect; but he who made the universe and set up the system of cause and effect, is not himself subject to it. The laws of cause and effect are simply the way God normally does things and how he gets them done in our universe, but he stands above the laws of cause and effect. Just as he created the universe out of nothing and laid down its laws and principles of movement, so he can alter things if he wishes. The Bible is witness to many a time when the living God made things work in a different way because it so pleased him on the occasion.

Chance

It's undeniable, if you just look around at the universe, that a lot of things happen by chance. The learned physicists again will say, 'If you observe our universe, it runs partly like a clock and partly like clouds. The clock is determined by the engineer, and we hope it keeps time. But clouds are a *stochastic system*, a process involving the operation of chance. The stormy winds may blow them either this way or that way.'

That's not an accident; God made them to work that way. But it doesn't mean that chance has the last word of what shall happen in our universe, for God has set bounds to the systems of chance.

Let me use an illustration. You pump up the tyre on the front wheel of your car with air now and again. Air is a gas; if only you could see it, it's millions and millions of molecules of gas that don't stay still for one split second. They are forever going all over the place, higgledy-piggledy. So random is the movement, if you were to say, 'I want to know where that particular particle is now,' you'd have a job, because the whole thing is a chance system. Underneath that square inch of tyre at this split second there might not be many molecules—they might be in the other side of the tyre.

You say, 'Why does it act as a tyre?'

It's because the engineer designed this rubber stuff to go around all these particles. While they're inside the tyre, they're buzzing by chance all over the place. You can't tell when and where. The tyre binds them—it is a boundary for them, so that they serve the purpose for which the engineer devised the tyre to start with.

God controls the boundaries and the goal according to his will

There are many systems in this world, the clouds and many others, that are subject to chance. But chance doesn't have the last word, for God has set their bounds according to his will. What a comfort that is in the lives of believers. With all the choices we make, many a thing seemingly happens by chance, but chance isn't the final power. It's God himself who has set the bounds and even the stormy winds fulfil his will. So we rejoice today in God's providential control.

Our blessed Lord, Son of the Father, assured us that such is God's wonderful control of things that not one sparrow falls but the Father knows it, and the very hairs of our heads are numbered (Matt 10:29–30). God has set the goal to which he is determined to bring his people, and that goal is that they shall be conformed to the image of his Son. The God who made us and redeemed us is so in control that he can assure us that, be what they will, all things work together for good, to the purpose that one day we shall be conformed to the image of his Son (see Rom 8:28–29).

God likewise controls the wicked; he puts them on a long leash. Very often they serve their own will, but in the end God is in control. 'He catches the wise in their own craftiness,' the Bible says (Job 5:13). The supreme example is the death of his dear Son. For their own reasons the rulers in Israel were determined to have him crucified. They were going to put an end to his claims that he was the Messiah. It wasn't that they thought they were serving the purposes of God; they did it for their own ends. What did God do? God raised him from the dead.

As we look back we begin to see how stupid those men were. If they wanted to prove that Jesus wasn't the Messiah, the last thing they should have done was to crucify him.

You say, 'Why was that?'

Well, the Old Testament prophesied that the Messiah would die, but not knowing the Scriptures they went and crucified him. In the overruling wisdom of God, it proved the very opposite—that he was the Messiah.

Even Satan in the end will be made to serve God's purposes. Before he can tempt any of God's people, he has to ask permission of the Lord. When he attacked Job, Satan showed himself to have power over politics, human greed, and even the storm; but before he interfered in those things he had to ask God's permission to touch Job (see Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6). Before Satan

was allowed to touch the apostles and sift them as wheat, our Lord indicated he had asked permission (see Luke 22:31). He was given permission to test them.

In some sense we live in enemy territory, but the enemy doesn't have the last say. In all of it our blessed Lord stands in control. If he allows his enemies, Satan in particular, to test his people, it is only 'so far and no further'. He shall not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear (1 Cor 10:13).

The great day will come when the same Word that created heaven and earth shall bid them depart.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (2 Pet 3:10)

Eternity will dawn and the almighty God, the omnipotent, shall reign—not only as the indisputable, but as the undisputed sovereign Lord of all.

Why isn't Everybody Saved?

This session will lead on to the period of questioning. The topic that I must briefly discuss is one that would demand a whole week's seminars and not just forty minutes of time.

When we consider the sovereignty of God, sooner or later three major questions will arise in our minds:

1. *The question of evil.* If God is sovereign and all powerful, and cares for justice, why does he not put down evil and evil men? How did evil arise anyway in the first place?
2. *The problem of pain.* If God is almighty, he can do what he likes. If he is all loving and really loves us, his creatures, why do so many people suffer so much pain?
3. *Why isn't everybody saved?*

It is the third of these questions that we shall consider today. If God is almighty and all powerful, if he is in ultimate control and really wants all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, why do so many people remain unsaved? This problem has exercised some of the profoundest minds in the church over the course of many centuries and I do not suppose that I'm going to solve it for you in these few brief moments.

When we face the fact that many do not trust the Saviour and remain unsaved, people come to different conclusions. Those who emphasize the sovereignty of God will come up with a decided emphasis on one side. Those who emphasize the free will of man, and man's responsibility, will come up with a set of answers on the other side. It has been debated over many centuries.

Emphasis on the sovereignty of God

When he came to face this problem, the great Reformer, Calvin himself, for whom God be praised, followed St Augustine. As I understand it, he proposed the answer that God is sovereign, and in his sovereignty he has chosen some to be saved. They will be saved because God is sovereign in his choice. His grace is irresistible, and so, having chosen some, when he calls them his call is effectual. He shows them his grace and, because he is sovereign, it proves irresistible and they are saved. Regenerate, they are then born again and given the spirit of God. They have been justified by faith, of course, and will endure to the end because of God's sovereign choice, plan, and purpose.

They will also say that man had free will given to him by God at the beginning; but in using his free will to disobey God, man fell. In that fall, mankind has been totally ruined. Not in the sense that every man and woman is as bad as he or she could possibly be, but totally

ruined in the sense that no faculty in a human being, be it mental, emotional, soulish, spiritual, or physical, has escaped at least some of the damage done by sin. Therefore, because of the fall, man is dead in trespasses and in sins.

Some have said that he is so dead it would be useless to preach the gospel to him and call upon him to repent. You might as well preach the gospel to the log of a tree that is dead and couldn't hear you preach; or to a corpse, which, being dead, couldn't possibly repent or even hear what you say. The man is dead, and therefore cannot begin the process that would lead to his salvation.

What has to happen is this. Having decided to save some, God chose them from before the foundation of the world. Then, at some stage in their lives, he regenerates them. He doesn't ask their consent; he doesn't invite their cooperation or any exercise of free will. In his sovereignty he simply decides to regenerate them and gives them new life. To use the old English, he *quickens* them.

At the time they may not realize they have been quickened, but presently, when they hear the gospel—today, tomorrow, next year or whenever—they will respond to it, because God has first quickened them, and they will find that God has given them the faith. Men and women cannot decide to believe; God has to give them the faith to believe with. They'll find that God, according to his electing purpose, has given them the faith to believe with. They repent and believe; they are justified, forgiven, reconciled, and now born again.

Before they even believed, before they repented, God regenerated them. Then eventually, he gave them the faith to believe. They repent, they believe, and they are then born again. The analogy is of a child, first of all conceived, then alive in the womb, and sometime later born. This is the process by which God saves those whom he has elected to save.

Ultimately, their answer to the question of why so many people are not saved is that God decided of his sovereign will to pass them by. They were sinners like we all are, and they deserve the penalty of sin. They have no grounds for complaint, therefore, if God consigns them ultimately to perdition. Because they deserve it, they have no claim on mercy. By definition, no-one has a claim on mercy, or else it wouldn't be mercy. Mercy must be God acting in his sovereign grace and free will, deciding to have mercy. You cannot say to God, 'I deserve mercy.' How could you, if you are a sinner?

So these people, sinners like the rest of us, deserve eternal perdition. They're not saved, because God decided not to save them. In his sovereignty he decided to pass them by. Therefore, he did not regenerate them, nor quicken them, nor give them the faith to believe. He left them where he found them, dead in sins, and ultimately they will perish. And all this solely on the grounds, not of their works or what they deserve, but of God's sovereign choice made before the foundation of the world.

That is a view sincerely held by mighty theologians and very godly men and women in the course of the ages. As I proceed you will see that I do not hold that view, but this afternoon I'm not going to try to prove to you what I believe. As a brother in Christ, I will simply put before you some Scriptures that I find important, helpful, and, may I say, necessary for us to consider in the context of this great matter. I offer these to you as my contribution to your thinking about these things. I trust you will have the brotherly and sisterly grace to take what I say in the spirit in which it is said, and together we might make progress in the

understanding of God and his will. If we need to be adjusted in our thinking, may God give us the grace to be humble enough to accept it.

God's justice

First of all, I want to take the question of God's sovereignty in relation to his justice. There is a slogan that is very frequently repeated: 'Let God be God', followed by the question, 'Who are you to reply against God?' It is an excellent slogan, 'Let God be God.' But when we have said that, we must say, 'we'll let God be what God likes.' But what does he like? God is sovereign and can do as he pleases, but what does he please to do. God is all powerful, but not simply all powerful; God is love. Scripture will never say, 'God is power.' It will say, 'God is love' (1 John 4:7-21). Scripture makes it very clear that in his sovereignty God will never do anything that goes against his justice. He will always be just and he will never do anything that goes against his love.

That is fundamental to our thinking. *Let God be God; but let God be the God who has revealed himself.* One of the tests by which we may judge whether our idea of God is right, is our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. There is nothing in God, no attitude or action of his, that is different from what was exposed and revealed through Jesus Christ our Lord. If Jesus wept over Jerusalem because they would not come to him, you may be sure that he was in that very moment expressing the heart of God towards those who refuse to be saved.

So I ask you to think, in the first place, of the justice of God's judgments as they are discussed in holy Scripture.

The final judgment

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev 20:11-15)

When the dead stand before God they shall be judged out of the records in the books, according to their works. The severity of the sentence will vary. Our Lord himself is going to be the judge, and when he was here on earth he said that those who contravened their Lord's will in ignorance will be beaten with few stripes. Those who contravened it knowingly will be beaten with many stripes (Luke 12:47-48). He also said that it shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for certain cities in Palestine (Matt 10:15).

You say, 'How could he say that? How does he know?'

Because he's going to be the judge. 'The Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son' (John 5:22). He solemnly affirms that it shall be more tolerable for some than for

others. 'And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, *according to what they had done*' (Rev 20:12).

But what is it that will decide whether or not any person is dismissed to the lake of fire? Is it their works? Does Scripture say that if anyone's works are found to be enormously wicked, he or she will be cast into the lake of fire; but if a person's works aren't all that bad, he or she will be admitted to God's heaven? No, it doesn't say that at all. It doesn't even begin to say it, because it wouldn't be true. The thing that decides whether anybody is or is not cast into the lake of fire is this: 'if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire' (v. 15).

We can see at once how important that is, because if we who believe in the Lord Jesus were judged in the absolute sense according to our works, our doom would be perdition. 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23). That would be as true of you when you're ninety-nine years old, as it is now when you're twenty-five: you have sinned in the past and you'll still come short of God's glory.

If eternity depended on our works, then all of us would perish. It is not works that decide whether any of us will or will not go to the lake of fire, will or will not go to heaven; it is whether our names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. I want to suggest to you here and now that the names are written in that book, not on the ground of works whatsoever, but on the ground of the sacrifice of Christ. If anyone is to be condemned, not simply for their works, but because he or she did not believe, it must have been possible for them to believe if they had chosen to. Does it say anywhere that people will be condemned for not believing? It does indeed:

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. (John 3:18-19)

These are very important verses in this respect. The whole point of the judgment is that light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

So here is our Lord, who shall be the judge, saying that people will be condemned, not simply for their works, but because they would not believe: 'Whoever does not believe is condemned already.' Why are they condemned? Because they did not believe. I want to suggest to you that if God in his justice is going to condemn somebody to eternal perdition for not believing, then it must have been possible for that person to have believed if he or she had chosen to. I am not happy to leave that simply as a deduction that I have made, I want you to read our Lord Jesus enunciating exactly the same principle.

Jesus said, 'For judgement I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, 'Are we also blind?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, "We see", your guilt remains.' (John 9:39-41)

What does that mean? At the beginning of the chapter our Lord found a man who was physically blind. He was a son of Adam, of course, heir to all the disabilities that sin has introduced.

The disciples said to the Lord, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'

And our Lord said, 'Neither' (see vv. 1-3).

1. No-one will be condemned for not seeing what they didn't have the faculty of sight to see

It was not his fault that he was born blind. We have our Lord's own statement, therefore, that a person is not to be blamed for the physical condition in which he or she is born. That is a very important principle. Having given the man physical sight, our Lord used it as a parable of spiritual blindness, so that when the Pharisees listened to his conversation they saw the point.

With some sarcasm, they said to him, 'So we're blind, are we? You're saying that we Pharisees are spiritually blind?'

To which our Lord replied, 'If you were really blind, you would not have sinned' (see 9:41).

What did he mean? He didn't mean that if they were spiritually blind and unable to see anything they would be sinless. We are all sinners. The phrase 'to have sin' in John's writings means to be guilty, to be blameworthy. Our Lord was making the point, 'If you hadn't the faculty of sight; if you were spiritually blind so that you couldn't possibly see; you would not be held guilty for not seeing.' That is an exceedingly important principle of God's righteousness and judgment. God will never condemn anybody for not seeing what, by definition, they couldn't see. This is not my deduction, this is what the Judge himself says: 'If you were blind, you would not have sinned; you couldn't be blamed for not believing.'

Imagine someone coming before the great white throne, standing before our blessed Lord, the judge of all men. He is condemned to perdition, and the man says, 'Am I allowed to ask you a question?'

'Yes.'

'Why am I being condemned?'

Suppose the answer is, 'For not seeing the book in my hand.'

And the man says, 'What book? I can't see any book.'

And the Lord says, 'Of course you can't see the book; you're blind, aren't you?'

And the man says, 'Am I going to be condemned for not seeing what I couldn't see?'

Suppose the Judge said, 'Yes'. I think heaven itself would turn black. What a horrible injustice that would be, to condemn a man for not seeing what he couldn't see. It will never happen. Our Lord is on record as saying it. 'If you were blind, you would have no sin.'

But the Pharisees claimed to be able to see and that's another story altogether. Our Lord said to them, 'You claim to see enough so that you can say that I am an imposter and a liar. All

right, you've taken the responsibility upon yourselves and for that you will be condemned' (John 9:41).

Further to that, our Lord is talking to his disciples about the world that was about to reject him.

If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: 'They hated me without a cause.' (John 15:22–25)

No-one will ever be condemned for not seeing what wasn't there to be seen

So now the parallel, or the opposite side of the coin. No-one will be condemned in the first place for not seeing what he didn't have the faculty of sight to see; conversely, no-one will ever be condemned for not seeing what wasn't there to be seen.

'If I had not come and spoken to them these things that no other had spoken; if I had not come and done these miracles among them that no other had done; then they wouldn't have sinned.' What does it mean? It means they wouldn't be held guilty for rejecting what they had never seen or heard.

Suppose a man comes to the final judgment and is condemned. When he asks why he is being condemned, God says, 'You're being condemned for not believing on Jesus.'

'But who is Jesus? I've never heard of him.'

God says, 'I know you've never heard of him, but you're going to be condemned for not believing him anyway.'

Our Lord says himself that it won't happen. No one will ever be condemned for not accepting what they never saw and never heard.

People who have heard the gospel

Let us, therefore, consider those who have heard, and leave that other almighty problem about those who have never heard of the Lord Jesus for another occasion.

Those who have heard: why are they condemned? Because they didn't believe. Could they have believed, or were they so ruined by the fall that they had lost the power to believe and the power to repent? Were they dead in trespasses and in sins to such extent that they couldn't turn to God? If they were ever to be saved, God had to give them the faith to believe with. He decided not to give them the faith, but just to let them pass by and perish. Is that the situation?

Romans 10

In these closing moments I wish to point out certain important things towards the end of Romans 10. At the beginning of that chapter Paul is explaining how he desires that his kinsmen according to the flesh would be saved, and then he proceeds to tell us why they are not. He has preached his heart out and still they are not saved. Is it because salvation is

difficult? No, it isn't difficult at all. He says, 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (v. 8). You only have to close in on it and you'll be saved.

Is it because they were different from other people? No, says Paul:

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' (vv. 12–13)

That raises a question for Paul. 'How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?' (v. 14). If salvation depends on calling on the name of the Lord, how will people call on the name of the Lord in whom they have not believed?

'Why aren't they saved?'

They haven't believed.

'Why haven't they believed?'

They've never called on the name of the Lord.

'So, because they haven't believed, they haven't called?'

But there's a further difficulty in that verse: 'how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?' If you're going to call on the name of the Lord, you have to believe in him; but how will you believe in him if you haven't first heard of him? So, if you haven't heard you won't believe; if you haven't believed you won't call. Do you see the steps in the argument?

And there's another difficulty in the verse: 'How are they to hear without someone preaching?'

Paul now faces each one of these difficulties:

- No preacher, no hearing;
- No hearing, no believing;
- No believing, no calling ;
- No calling, no salvation.

Would any or all of these combined prove to be the reason why Israel are not saved?

'And how are they to preach unless they are sent?' (v. 15). You see, if people are going to hear the word of God through a preacher, that preacher will have to be sent by God. It can't be a mere orator getting up and expounding his own philosophical views. If people are going to hear *the Lord* talking to them, the preacher must be from God.

Why are they not saved?

1. Perhaps the preachers haven't been sent

'Oh, they have,' says Paul: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!' (v. 15; cf. Isa 52:7).

2. Perhaps they hadn't heard of him

But they had. 'But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ' (Rom 10:16–17; cf. Isa 53:1).

3. *Perhaps they didn't hear him*

Notice the question that follows, 'But I ask, have they not heard?' (v. 18). Did they not hear him? If you're going to believe in Christ, it's not enough to hear about him, you'll have to hear Christ himself talking to you through his word.

Were these folks not saved because they never heard Christ? Some might be tempted to say, 'Yes, that's the reason. You see, they were born dead in trespasses and in sins, so they couldn't hear anything. The reason they're not saved is that God didn't open their ears so they could hear.'

But if we answered that, we should be wrong. Look at what Paul says. 'I say it's not so, is it?' That's the way he phrases his question in Greek, 'It's not so, is it, that they did not hear?' 'They did hear,' says the Greek. '. . . for their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world' (v. 18). They did hear.

And who was it that heard? Nice, bright believers? No, these are the people that finally rejected the gospel (v. 16). But they heard him; it would be false to say that the unregenerate are so dead in sins they can't possibly hear, and that's why they're not saved. These were unregenerate men and they refused the gospel, but it wasn't because they hadn't heard Christ. They had.

4. *Perhaps Israel did not know*

Again, the Greek question is phrased so as to demand the answer, 'It's not so, is it, that they did not understand?' (v. 19). If it could be argued that they didn't know the gospel, that could account for their not being saved. Is that the reason why they weren't saved? 'No, it isn't,' says Paul, 'they did.'

They were unregenerate men, dead in trespasses and in sins, but they heard nonetheless, and they knew. Where people are in ignorance, there is hope for mercy. Paul tells us that he was a blasphemer before his conversion, a persecutor and injurious, but he obtained mercy because he did it ignorantly in unbelief (see 1 Tim 1:13). But there came a day when Paul was illumined; he heard the voice of the Saviour, and then he had to choose. Would he believe or wouldn't he?

Paul insists that these people had heard and they had understood, but they rejected it. That's why they weren't saved.

The conclusion of the argument

- From all eternity, had God chosen to pass them by?
- He wishes *all men* to be saved, but is that to be understood in the sense that he wishes *all kinds of people* to be saved: Irish, Eskimos, Americans, black, white, people of colour, and even English?
- Does he want all without distinction to be saved, but not all without exception?
- Did he ever actually desire every particular person to be saved?
- Did he choose to elect some and give them faith, so that they should then hear the gospel, repent, believe, and be saved?
- Did he decide to pass others by because he never did intend them to be saved?

- Was it his sovereign choice alone that decided it, and we must let God be God and leave it there?

Well, my dear brothers and sisters, I find it impossible to believe it to be true. Listen to what the almighty, sovereign God himself says to the nation of Israel, through Isaiah and Paul. 'All day long,' he says, 'I have held out my hands' (Rom 10:21; cf. Isa 65:2).

What majesty! Picture it if you can. Why does almighty God stretch out his hands to guilty sinners? Why doesn't he stay seated on his throne? Yes, he is the sovereign and only potentate, King of kings and Lord of lords, but for man's salvation he came down from heaven in the person of Jesus Christ and stretched out his hands, like a parent calling a little child. 'Come,' says he. God never stretched them further than when his own dear Son died in agony on Calvary.

Did he want them to come? Will you say that they can't come unless God gives them the faith to come with, and he's decided not to, so they can't come?

What? So he stands there, pretending he wants them to come—making it look as if he wants them to come, stretching out his hands and pleading with them to come—and all the time he doesn't want them to?

There is only one way out of that predicament known to me, and the explanation would go like this. God has two sets of counsels. He has his public counsels by which he declares he would have all men to be saved; then he has his secret counsels, according to which he's decided to save some and deliberately pass others by and leave them to perish.

God's actions are consistent with his character

You will forgive me for speaking on this matter with some warmth. I do not mean my warmth to decide the issue, but in this great issue of the sovereignty of God and how it relates to humankind, and ultimately to our salvation, I suggest to you that we must pause long and think hard, because we are talking ultimately about the character of God. 'Let God be God.' Yes, God is sovereign and will do as he likes. But what God likes is consistent with perfect justice and perfect love.

How shall I be safely guided if I may only take one direction in the matter? For my choice, I think to myself of the blessed Lord Jesus standing outside Jerusalem, breaking his heart. Was he sincere? Why those tears? It was precisely because the people wouldn't come (see Matt 23:37).

I find it impossible to add the explanation that one of the reasons why he was weeping was that he would have gathered them, but God hadn't elected them and they couldn't come. Jesus Christ is God incarnate. In saying, 'I would have saved you, but the fault is that "you would not!"; you could have been saved but you refused'; Jesus Christ is unerringly and without any hidden reservations telling out the heart and mind of the sovereign God.

Question & Answer Session

Question one

How do you love somebody you can't see?

DWG: That is a real problem, and there are two slightly different answers given to it in Scripture. In 1 John 4, the apostle makes the point, 'If anyone says, "I love God", and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen' (v. 20). The logic behind it is simply this: everyone who is born of God has the life of God.

I'll tell you a secret if you promise not to tell anybody else. Christians are a funny lot, all full of angles and difficulties, and what have you. Loving them is a sign that you've been born of God. 'We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren' (3:14 KJV). The logic is simply that if you love the Father, you also love whoever has been born of him (5:1). Because we are in the same family, there's something about God in our brothers and sisters. If we don't love them, then our claim to love God whom we haven't seen is airy-fairy talk.

On the other side, of course, it is a miracle of God's grace in salvation that we love the Saviour without having seen him. Remember what our Lord said to Thomas, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed' (John 20:29).

Physical sight is not the only kind of sight there is. There is spiritual sight. As Peter puts it, having not seen the Saviour, believers are prepared to endure persecution. 'Though you have not seen him, you love him' (1 Pet 1:8). How can that be? The answer is that, by God's Holy Spirit, we have seen the Lord; not with physical sight but with the spiritual eye of faith. It is a miracle, of course, but it is a genuine thing.

How can you love somebody that you haven't seen? Well, ask the next one hundred believers you come across and you'll find them actually saying that they love the Lord Jesus, and many of them are prepared to prove it with their lives. How do they do it? It's a mystery to atheists. Well, the answer is the miracle of the new birth.

Question two

If you had to pick one basic Christian truth to emphasize in today's society, what would it be, and how would you suggest a Christian should convey it to the non-Christian community?

DWG: If I had to give one truth, what should I say? That's a difficult question to answer because, if we observe the way the Lord Jesus approached people, he talked to them in

different ways according to their need. To the learned rabbi in John 3, he talked about the new birth. To the woman at the well in John 4, he talked about the Holy Spirit and the satisfaction of the great thirst-quenching water of salvation. So our Lord talked to different people in different ways.

If I was in Russia, I would say the first great thing to talk about is God. But then I would want to explain what I meant by 'God'. Their idea of God is the God represented by the superstitions of the unreformed medieval church, all its accumulated riches and very often its despising of the poor, its denial of being sure of salvation, and all those kinds of things. So I would very soon want to explain something of what God is as revealed in Jesus Christ.

In our modern world I would want to start, perhaps, with God as creator. At school many children have been taught that science has made it impossible to believe in God. So I would have to start where Romans 1 starts and talk about the evidence for the Creator; and then some would need to be taught about God's law and his holiness. What's the good of telling people that they need to be forgiven of their sins when they don't understand what sin is. They need to be taught about God and his holiness so that they might see the need of salvation. If you want to sum it up in a word: God; and then God revealed in Christ.

Question three

Were there volcanoes in the garden of Eden?

DWG: As far as I know there weren't, and I should have thought it quite unlikely, considering the part of the world where Eden was. I don't think there are many mountains in the immediate vicinity, but if there were mountains in the early earth, were there volcanoes? I don't see why not.

You could say, 'But Genesis says that when God saw what he'd made, he saw that everything was good.'

Yes, everything was good, but I'm not sure everything was safe. Are you? We need the fires underneath the crust of our earth as part of the machinery for our atmosphere, heating, and what have you. The sun up in the sky isn't safe, I might tell you. God organized our world so that it's just precisely at the right point: not too near, not too far. Many other things are critically organized. We need the sun up in the sky, or we should freeze to death. We couldn't live without it, but the sun isn't safe. Australians will tell you that you'd better wear a hat when you go outside, or else you may get cancer from the light.

God planted a garden in Eden, which shows you that the rest of the world wasn't garden. His commission to man was to go forth and rule, and have dominion. It was a marvellous, exciting scheme, and if man had done it in his unfallen state as a child with a father, it would have been delightful. God surely would have shielded him from danger. Man sinned, and that enormously altered man's relationship with creation.

Whether there were volcanoes around the world in those parts that Adam wasn't going to see, I wouldn't be sure. All I would say is that there was electricity, and atoms, and there could have been laser beams; all sorts of things that were potentially dangerous, but God has given mankind the ability to harness them for our use.

Question four

How do we reconcile man's ability to choose (which you have clearly explained), and God's choice? Being chosen in him before the foundation of the world?

DWG: As to choice, I would apply our relationship with the Lord to the situation that men and women face in marriage. I was born after Queen Victoria died, a long time ago, when it wasn't thought right for the woman to make the proposal. The man was the first of the two to make his choice known. If he chose Joan Smith rather than Sheila Brown, did that automatically mean that Joan Smith had no choice? Most certainly not. He chose her, and she in response chose him.

Firstly, the fact that God sovereignly chooses does not eliminate choice on our side. Secondly, and I say this with due deference to those who hold a different view, I myself understand Ephesians 1 to be saying, not that 'he chose us'—full stop; but 'he chose us in Christ'. God's scheme that he had in his heart before the world was created, was to have children, which is what Ephesians is talking about.

How could he arrive at having children? The answer was, of course, that he would have a human race. He would need a universe to put them in, and a planet to put them on. So those things had to be done. Then they would need to be educated by his law. But the key would be that his own dear Son would become human, so that when human beings repented of sin and put their faith in him, they could be joined to the Saviour and put in Christ. You can't be a son of God without being in Christ. You don't first become a son, and are then put in Christ.

So how do you get into Christ? That's the point. You get into Christ when God, through Christ, offers you salvation and you make your response. You have to 'choose life', as Moses said to the people (Deut 30:19). It is God's election, then; it was his choice that he would have sons chosen in Christ and there will be multitudes of human beings who have become children of God. How you get into Christ to start with is laid out in the rest of Scripture. It is by hearing the word of God, hearing the Saviour, responding in repentance and faith, and choosing him.

Question five

Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1, as to, 'upholding' etc., bring out very much the glory of the Son. Please help as to this.

DWG: Thank you for the question. When I was thinking about it and quoting those passages about creation, I was talking about God, and I thought to myself somebody will say, 'But wait a minute, Mr Preacher, you're misusing your text. The text is not about God, it's about Christ.'

Well, you're right, of course. But then I have to ask you, who was this Christ through whom, and by whom, and for whom, the worlds were made? Did he just begin to be when he was born in Bethlehem, or was he the Word that was with God in the very beginning, and was God? Well, of course, he was the Word who was with God. He was there at creation; it was through him that creation was made.

You say, 'But the Bible says that *God* created . . .; not *the Word*.' But John 1:1 says, 'The Word was with God, and the Word was God.' Abraham believed God. Tell me, in those days

when Abraham believed God, did he know that God was a Trinity? There's no evidence that he did. The God that Abraham believed in, was he a Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Of course he was.

So I was talking in shorthand; but when I talked about God creating and then quoted the passage in Colossians that talks about Christ, I did it because I'm an incurable Christian in that sense, and I believe that Christ is God and he is the one through whom God created the universe.

Question six

God gave sinless Adam and Eve the ability to reject him. Everybody was sinful, of course, if they were born after the fall. Does it follow, therefore, that sinful people have the ability to worship and obey God in a way that is acceptable to him? Man wills to do what his mind and/or feelings direct. How can sinful man make his will say, 'Accept Christ', when both his will and feelings have been so affected by the fall that he does not/cannot understand spiritual things, and does not seek after God?

DWG: These are very perceptive questions, and they come from that understanding of the problem that is somewhat different from mine. I warned you about that at the beginning. This is admitting, in the first place, that God gave sinless Adam and Eve free will; the ability, therefore, to obey or not to obey God, and the ability to choose which they would do. Since the fall, all have been ruined.

You ask, 'Does it follow, therefore, that those born after the fall have the ability to worship and obey God in a way that is acceptable to him?' If you put the question just like that, sinful people do not have the ability to worship God in a way that is acceptable to him. They are called upon to worship God. The 'eternal gospel' mentioned in the Revelation 14 is an appeal to all the inhabitants of earth to 'worship him who made heaven and earth' (vv. 6-7). Worship, in that sense, means to bow down and acknowledge the superiority and the deity of God. Many a man does that who is not yet born again. He is not yet saved, but he acknowledges that there is a creator.

John 4. But if you go further, and ask, 'Have they the ability to worship God in a way that is acceptable to him?' our Lord told the woman at Samaria that 'God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth' (v. 24). In that sense, without the Holy Spirit men and women are not able to worship God as he should be worshipped.

But now what follows from that? Can a sinful man or woman, born of Adam, be brought to worship God acceptably? Yes: through the gospel. How does God bring people to worship him? By revealing his Son to them. When Peter realized that Jesus was the Son of God, our Lord replied, 'flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven' (Matt 16:17). God revealed this to Peter.

John 6. The question arises: when God reveals himself to someone, does that someone have choice any longer? Can they shut their eyes to it? Yes! If you're in the dark physically and I bring in a light, you can choose whether you're going to look at it or shut your eyes. When God reveals his Son, do people still have the choice whether they will receive him, or whether they will shut their eyes? That's the point of issue.

When the Jews came to Christ he said, 'I've come down from heaven to do my Father's will, and if you wish to have eternal life you must eat my flesh and drink my blood.' The Jews said, 'That's absolute nonsense, we know his father and mother. How can he say, "I've come down from heaven"?' Our Lord's reply was, 'Yes, gentlemen, it is difficult; but then you can't come to me unless my Father draws you—you'll never understand it unless my Father explains it' (see vv. 41–44).

But now the question is: does the Father draw everybody or only some? The answer is given in the context. 'It is written in the Prophets, "And they will all be taught by God."' (v 45). Yes, of course God takes the initiative in the salvation of everybody that is saved. It's his idea; we didn't think up salvation. You didn't come to God one day and say, 'Look, we are all miserable sinners, God, but may I suggest that you should consider having mercy on us, and perhaps you would even consider sending your Son into the world to die for us?'

That wasn't your thought or suggestion. Of course not. God is sovereign and he takes the initiative. 'Who has known the mind of the Lord . . . Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' (Rom 11:34–35). God initiates salvation: the Father sent the Son, and the Father draws people to the Son. But that doesn't mean they have no choice; they can refuse. That what it says at the end of Romans 10.

The question goes on to say, 'Man wills to do what his mind and/or feelings direct. How can sinful man make his will say, "Accept Christ", when both his will and feelings have been so affected by the fall that he does not/cannot understand spiritual things, and does not seek after God?'

That is a problem. It is the fact that we have all been ruined by the fall and are dead in trespasses and in sins. But let me start with that simple analogy that our Lord himself used in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). According to the prodigal's father, when the prodigal was away in the far country, he was dead. The father said to the elder brother, 'for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found' (v. 32). Does that mean that when the prodigal was down in the far country he couldn't think anything about his father at all? No, because he did think about him.

Then Ephesians 2:1: 'you were dead in the trespasses and sins . . .' Does that mean that we were literally dead and couldn't see the difference between right and wrong? No, it doesn't mean anything of the sort. ' . . . in which you once walked' — we were in some sense alive, but dead to God.

John 7. Our Lord is talking to the Jews in the temple (see vv. 14–24). They are unregenerate, and they're about to stone him. 'Gentlemen, you want to know about my teaching and you say "how is it that this man has learning?"' Then he starts to argue with them. 'Use your critical judgment on my teaching. You're about to kill me because I healed a man on the Sabbath day, but think for a moment. Moses commanded that a boy should be circumcised when he is eight days old. If that eighth day was a Sabbath, the law of circumcision comes before the law of Sabbath, and he must be circumcised on the Sabbath. The law of circumcision takes precedence over the law of Sabbath. If that's what Moses said, I appeal to you to judge righteous judgment,' said Christ.

You say, 'Is he appealing to redeemed believers?'

No, he's talking to unregenerate Jews, calling on them to use their moral judgment and assess the quality of his teaching.

He says, 'For if Moses was right to permit circumcision on the Sabbath, will you accuse me of sinning because I have made a man's whole body well on the Sabbath?'

So here Christ is urging unregenerate men to use their moral judgment on his teaching.

John 8. And then our Lord does another thing. He shines the light, not on himself and his teaching, but on those men. Could they see that they were sinners? Could they see the light? They certainly could, but they turned from it and ran away (v. 9). They could see it all right. It's quite false to think that unregenerate people cannot see the difference between right and wrong. A man knows that he's a sinner, and when he comes near to Christ he becomes conscious of his sin.

It's pushing the metaphor too far to say, 'Because people are dead in trespasses and sins, they can't come to any right moral judgment.' They can.

If you doubt that, the next time a man gets out of a Rolls-Royce at your local bank, steal his Rolls-Royce and see whether he's got any moral judgment.

Yes, men and women have moral judgment. Christ shines the light of his truth into their moral judgment and asks them to use it to see that he is the Son of God. For that they will need their eyes open. This is a spiritual thing, and Christ is willing to open their eyes (v. 12).

John 9. How did he do it for the blind man? Did he say, 'Eyes, open,' and his eyes were opened at once? No. He made clay and put it on the man's eyes, but the man still couldn't see. Did the man have to do anything before he could see? Yes, he did. He had to go down to the pool of Siloam, and wash.

Can you imagine the man saying to himself, 'What? He's made clay and put it on my eyes, and now I've got to find my way through the city to the pool of Siloam? This sounds crazy to me. Shall I do it; is there any point in doing it?'

So he had to make up his mind about Christ even before he set out to the pool. Had he any evidence on which to make up his mind? Well, yes, he had. He could ask himself, 'Is this Jesus actually a charlatan? Is he a fool?' He'd heard of what Jesus could do for other people, so there was evidence galore upon which he could come to the tentative conclusion that it was worth making the experiment, doing what Jesus said and finding out whether it worked. He made the experiment, and was able to see.

It is not true that we have to sit here passively, and we can't do anything if we would be saved. It is the fact that we are ruined by the fall, but we can still use our moral judgment. We can allow Christ to shine into our hearts, and when he shines, instead of running away, we must make up our minds that we're going to stay in the light. If we do that, like the woman taken in adultery, he will show us the way of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Questions seven and eight

Our time has just gone and there are two more questions.

How do you think God will react to the possibility of human cloning, and will he allow man to design another human creature?

What does God's word say about pain?

DWG: It is a difficult thing for some people to answer questions in a few words!

1. Will God allow cloning?

It seems to me that Revelation 13:11–15 says that the second beast has power to give life to the image of the first beast. Who knows what God will allow people to do. When they clone, they are not creating the genes. Man is not creating life; he has to start with genes and cells that are already made. He's only manipulating life; he's not creating it.

Will God allow him? Some people have said that God alone can create life. That is perfectly true, but it is evident that man has some part in engineering it. He can cure some diseases by engineering the genes, and so forth and so on. Women can take drugs that affect the mental health of babies in the womb. There are dire results in altering the chemical composition of the body, and God allows some people to do it, doesn't he? If I were to turn it back on you, I'd be very interested to hear what Scriptures you would advance in answer to that question.

2. What does God's word say about pain?¹

When it comes to pain, it's easy for a preacher to stand and preach theory sometimes, when he himself has never experienced much. Mere theory to people who are in pain is difficult to take. I don't have time to say what I'd love to say, but Hebrews 2:10 has been a great help to me.

Having started on this scheme of having us eventually as sons of God, conformed to the image of his Son, God knew in advance the pain it would involve for us.

He knew far more the pain that it would involve for him. He's not a God who sits on his throne and dishes out mere theory or commands. When we had gone astray, rebelled, and gone our own way, God himself suffered more than any one of us or all of us put together will ever suffer, for Jesus Christ is God incarnate.

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. (Heb 2:10)

So we dare to trust not just a preacher who relates what has been a help to him, but we look to Christ himself and see how he endured the sufferings for our sake.

¹ See the following books by David Gooding and John Lennox: *Christianity: Opium or Truth?* Chapter 6, 'The Problem of Pain'; *The Quest for Reality and Significance: Book 6, Suffering Life's Pain: Facing the Problems of Moral and Natural Evil*. (September, 2019.)

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.