

Sovereignty, Freedom, and Service

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God, ever merciful and just
With newborn babes did Tophet fill;
Down into endless torments thrust;
Merely to show His sovereign will.

This is that 'Horrible Decree!'
This that wisdom from beneath!
God (O detect the blasphemy)
Hath pleasure in the sinner's death.

-Charles Wesley

In the beginning, as we contemplate it, God created by an act of His will as large a number of intelligent beings as he could control. For we must maintain that even the power of God is finite, and we must not, under pretext of praising him, lose sight of his limitations. For if the divine power were infinite, of necessity it could not even understand itself, since the infinite is by nature incomprehensible. He made therefore just as many as He could grasp and keep in hand and subject to his providence. In the same way He prepared just as much matter as He could reduce to order.

-Origen (from Greek manuscript of De Principiis) [5]

The sovereignty of God has always been a tough concept to accept. Some, like Charles Wesley find emotional difficulty with the idea, while others like Origen have problems on an intellectual level. No Christian would deny that God is sovereign. The argument is over what it means for God to be sovereign and how does this play out in the believers life and that of the world. What does the Bible mean when it speaks of God's sovereignty? How does God's sovereignty effect our salvation? How then shall we live? These three questions will form the basis of our investigation into God's sovereignty.

To examine what the Bible says about God's sovereignty we need to look at what sovereignty means. Sovereignty is the status, dominion, rule, or authority of a sovereign [1]. A sovereign is a person who is independent of all others and supreme in power, rank, or authority [1]. Thus when we speak of the sovereignty of God, we are referring to the fact that God is the ruler of all, and all things are subject to Him. Knowing now what we mean, what does the Bible say? We see first in 1 Timothy 6:15 (KJV) that Jesus is called "... blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords ...". Potentate is an old word, which means a powerful ruler [1], and if that were not enough Paul also adds that Jesus is not just one in a class of powerful rulers but is "King of kings, and Lord of lords" thus the ruler of all rulers. Paul is clearly saying that Jesus rules all things, and it is important to note that a ruler must actually exercise their rule. A sovereign is not a ruler in

name only, nor for that matter is a potentate. Arthur W. Pink expresses this idea exceedingly well when he wrote,

Being infinitely elevated above the highest creature, He is the Most High, Lord of heaven and earth. Subject to none, influenced by none, absolutely independent; God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, always as He pleases. None can thwart Him, non can hinder Him. [4]

All great teachings of the Bible are found in many places, so we would expect to see this too appear in a multitude of scriptures. Psalm 47:2 says, "For the LORD most high is terrible; he is a great King over all the earth." Jeremiah 10:10 tells us that, "But the LORD is the true God, he is the living God, and an everlasting king: at his wrath the earth shall tremble, and the nations shall not be able to abide his indignation." In Daniel 2:47 we have the words Nebuchadnezzar spoke, "The king answered unto Daniel, and said, Of a truth it is, that your God is a God of gods, and a Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, seeing thou couldest reveal this secret." Daniel 4:34 reads, "And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation:" I wish Origen had looked at this more closely. The infinity of God comes forth clearly. God's power is not limited by what the finite can comprehend, nor is God who is infinite, unable to understand infinity. Origen's objections are not based on scripture but rather on Greek philosophy of the time, and are incompatible with scripture. In Origen's defense, some contend that his manuscripts, particularly the Greek ones, were doctored up by Gnostics, though even the Latin texts and other quotes have a strong flavor of limiting the Almighty. In any case we can easily see that God rules over all, He alone is the supreme authority and power. God is sovereign and exercises His sovereignty. He can and will do all He desires.

I have not heard anyone deny that God rules supreme in direct statement. The usual argument falls not on if God is sovereign but rather if, how, and when He exercises His sovereignty. The argument goes along the lines of "God is sovereign but He will not do anything which removes or impinges on the free will of His creation." Many in the reformed camp respond by denying free will, or treating it as dangerous idea. We read in Deuteronomy 30:19-20, "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: That thou mayest love the LORD thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the LORD sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them." Clearly a choice was there and the context of the passage indicates that it is not fictitious. R.C. Sproul writes that "Even the most ardent Calvinist would not deny that the will is free to choose whatever it desires." [6] His point is a good one, the problem is not with our sovereign God granting us the ability to choose, the problem revolves around our own hard hearts that choose our way not God's way. Romans 3:10-12 gives us the clear teaching that, "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one." Clearly man does not choose God. Clearly I did not either. Thankfully God is sovereign and chose me. Did God override my free will as is His right? Recalling that my free will is my ability to do that which I want to do. God in His sovereignty, preserved His decree that I be allowed to do what I want, and His decree that I was chosen by Him, by changing my heart and thus my desire. Ezekiel twice

records God's promise to change my heart. In Ezekiel 11:19 we read, "And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh:." In Ezekiel 36:26-27 we see even a fuller statement, "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them." So did God have to tip-toe around my will to achieve His ends? What foolishness! God is sovereign, He granted my will, He has so much sovereignty over my actions that I cannot breath without His granting. Pilate was struck by this truth when he warned Jesus to cooperate with him, since he had power over Jesus' life. Jesus responded in John 19:11, "Jesus answered, Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin." Clearly showing both Pilate's moral culpability and God's authority over the whole situation. God is seen to be sovereign in all situations, and He preserves His decree of free will for His people. Likewise, God's sovereignty is not compromised by the free will He gave us. God works them together perfectly because He willed it. God's sovereignty is supreme in both.

If God's sovereignty is the guarantee of free will, why does Charles Wesley have such a problem with it? The argument over sovereignty is one of the slipperiest debates that exists. The real problem is not with the scripture, but rather with the emotions and philosophy of those who have the problem. Wesley did not argue with God's theoretical sovereignty, but rather with God's decree to save some and allow others to perish. We now hit the area where the real argument stems from. Wesley does not feel that God's granting of free will is enough, he wants God to grant everyone liberty. Liberty is the ability to chose what you desire. God has liberty, Adam had liberty, we do not have liberty. I have a new heart, and thus want God. I cannot choose to not want God, I am free only to act upon what my desire is. My desire is to serve God, thus I am free to follow Him. Before God granted me a new heart, I was spiritually dead. I could only choose to do what I wanted to do, which was to sin. I could not choose to follow God, because I did not want to. My free will prevented my conversion, because I did not want it. I was a slave, a slave to my sin. Is this just a fancy philosophy I have made up or read somewhere? Indeed I have read this argument somewhere, and I am just paraphrasing it. The original argument is in Romans 6:16-22:

Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness. I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness. For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.

I was a slave. A slave cannot just choose to be free, because of some basic inability in them. The inability might be economic or social in the physical world, but spiritually we are slaves to sin because we want to be. What can we do? We can't. Only God can, and for the elect God intervenes and changes our heart and thus our desires. We become slaves to righteousness. What does it mean to be a slave to righteousness? Can I choose to go back to sin? No. I may sin, but I

cannot become a slave to sin anymore. I do not want to be a slave to sin, I want to remain a slave to righteousness. Quite frankly, I do not want liberty. Liberty means the possibility of choosing to leave God. I prayerfully thank God that He never gave me liberty, He gave me grace. I have heard many people state that they wish they were given the opportunity Adam had. Why, so they could fail? We seem to have the great delusion that we could do better. God put the finest examples of humanity, apart from Jesus, in the garden. Adam and Eve did not make it. I would not have made it, nor would anyone but Christ. Liberty in any but God is a terrifying concept, while grace is the most comforting.

So where is the problem? God does not give grace to everyone. God gives some men justice. We are all horrible sinners, so justice is to eternally condemn the sinner to hell, where God's wrathful presence will punish the sinner. Here is the problematic part of sovereignty. How can God choose to save some and not others? Doesn't God have to save everybody, or at least give the others liberty so they will have a fair chance? Romans 9:8-15 reads:

That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed. For this is the word of promise, At this time will I come, and Sara shall have a son. And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac; (For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;) It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

This verse has been challenged on the grounds of the quote "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." The quote is from Malachi 1:2-3, where the context is God's choice of Israel as His people as opposed to Edom. The argument is thus that the verse in Romans is not speaking of God's election of some unto salvation, but rather God's choice to use one nation over another in redemptive history. The problem with the challenge is that, Malachi says God chose to use the nation of Israel because God had elected Jacob to salvation but had not elected Esau to salvation. Far from disproving the contention, it shows off the principle stated in Exodus 20:5-6, "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments." The national blessing was based on the love God had for Jacob. The challenge also ignores that the quote from Malachi is given as a backing to the main quote from Genesis 25:34, which clearly identifies that we are speaking of Jacob and Esau the men. Additionally, we see in the genealogical structure of the passage in Romans that we must be speaking of individuals, and the context of the book of Romans is one of salvation not national blessing. Even when Paul speaks of Israel's salvation, he is clearly talking about salvation of people and not blessing of the nation. Peter Jeffery wisely brings out the final point to note when he wrote, "The only reason given for God's choice is that it was 'in order that God's purpose in election might stand'." [3] Why did God do it? God did it to fulfill His purpose. God did it for God. Romans 9:8-15 clearly says God elects some to salvation, and allows others to continue in their ways.

Does God enjoy the destruction of those who He does not call? NO! Jesus cried over unrepentant Jerusalem and lamented their hard hearts. Luke 13:34-35 reads,

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate: and verily I say unto you, Ye shall not see me, until the time come when ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.

1 Timothy 2:3-4 tells us that, “For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.” And in 2 Peter 3:9 we see that, “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” It is clear that God does not elect all, that those who God does not elect will not come to salvation, and that God does not enjoy the destruction of the non-elect.

So why does God not save all men? If God loves His creation, if God does not enjoy the destruction of the non-elect, why doesn't He elect them? Paul opened a can of worms in the early verses of Romans chapter 9. Paul dumps the can out in Romans 9:19-23,

Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory,

Paul tells us to watch ourselves at this point. It is easy in our lack of understanding to find fault with God, and thus sin against His holiness. Paul writes of God's right to do as He sees fit. We do not understand the plan, but we do understand that whatever God does is good, right, and loving. Is it loving for God to elect some and not all? Yes, because God does it! I do not understand why God chooses, I only know that God chooses based on His will, not my action. Praise be to Him for that, or I would be doomed. Paul says we are not off the hook for our sin, nor is God's justice unjust. We willfully sinned. Just justice demands our punishment. Some will receive the punishment, while others punishment is laid on Christ. We see in Proverbs 16:4 that, “The LORD hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil.” Romans 11:4-7 reads,

But what saith the answer of God unto him? I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal. Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work. What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded

Again we can clearly see God saves only some, He is good and just in so doing, and we are to worship Him. If there is an argument, it must be with God for God's sovereignty in salvation is secure in His word, and His reasons are veiled to our eyes. Job thought he could argue his case before God. He thought God would have to give in to his morality. God questioned Job about what Job really understood. Job got the point. Job responded in Job 42:1-6,

Then Job answered the LORD, and said, I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee. Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

Job saw that his understanding and moral indignation in his lot were wrong and an affront to God's holiness. Job thought he knew God, but when he saw the truth of God in God's absolute sovereignty he realized that what he knew before was just a shadow.

The final area I want to look at is how shall we live. It is along this line that another challenge to the doctrines of grace have been raised. Sydney Hunter put forth the following question,

If these beliefs of the Calvinists' are true the following questions must be answered. Why pray? If all the steps of man and the perching places of flies are programmed to an inevitable plan, then prayer is a waste of time. [2]

Mr. Hunter also asks,

Why pass out tracts, send missionaries, preach on the street, read the Bible, go to church, etc? Is there a page in the Bible that doesn't instruct and exhort man to act? Why exhort if man's actions are predetermined and he can't change them? [2]

Sadly, he has missed the entire point of God's sovereignty. Is it reassuring that God wants to help, but can't until we ask the right question, or certain people let Him? Does God need me to pass out tracts? What tract was given to Paul? Where in sovereignty do we claim that God does not appoint means as well as ends? Certainly God can accomplish things apart from us, but I presume this would not be challenged. God commands us to pray, and disciplines His disobedient children who do not pray as He commands. Prayer does not change God's mind, pray obeys His command and is part of His plan to bring about His sovereign will. Similarly with missions, tracts, church attendance, Bible reading, and other commands, God's sovereignty is what gives them meaning. Missions are meaningless without God's sovereignty. God's sovereign grace and gracious sovereignty ensures the success of any mission opportunity. Isaiah 55:10-11 states, "For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it." The success of the gospel is based on God's sovereignty, and God has commanded our participation. God is gracious that He allows us to be used as instruments in His hand. We are to prepare and train as 1 Peter 3:15 says, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:." As I have stated already sovereignty does not mean God appoints the net results alone. God appoints everything, my prayer, my study, my desire for Him, my eager participation. I want to please my loving Father, and thus seek to do all He commands. This is the joy of God's sovereignty, I can serve without fear, because God ensures it all. To God be the glory forever and ever!

God is sovereign over everything, and He exercises it. He is more than up to the task. His sovereignty is the basis of free will and thus our will cannot challenge His sovereignty. God elects those who He pleases to salvation, and does not elect others. This is good and wonderful because

God does it. Without God doing this none would be saved. We all deserve punishment, and grace is by definition not forced or required. Finally, God's sovereignty is the greatest motivator to pray, go on missions, attend church, read the Bible, and obey all the commands. God should be praised and worshiped for His holy sovereignty, not challenged by human wisdom and emotion. Soli Deo Gloria!

References

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