

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND OUR RESPONSIBILITY

Define "sovereignty"

A) Providence (God sustaining and directing all things)

1) God governs every aspect of creation

Consider the flood narrative. List the stated and implied aspects of creation God controls in bringing it, and in promising it will never occur again. (cf. Ps 104v10-30)

Through his eternal Son...

- 1) Preservation: God sustains and holds together all he has made (Heb 1v3, Col 1v17)
- 2) Concurrence: God works through the distinctive properties of all he has made (Job 37v6-13)
- 3) Governance: God directs all he has made (Eph 1v11, Prov 16v33)

Some distinctions. God's providence is either:

- 1) direct – God is the sole cause, eg. creation, resurrection
- 2) indirect – God uses "means" or "secondary causes," eg. rain through the water cycle (Ps 104v14)

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- 1) ordinary – he acts according to his usual appointed order, eg. the laws of science
 - 2) extraordinary – he acts beyond his usual appointed order, eg. the miraculous

"God has decreed ends as well as means, causes as well as effects, conditions and instrumentalities as well as the events which depend upon them."

Hodge, AA. *Outlines of theology*, (London, Banner of Truth, 1879), p.202

2) God governs every aspect of human life

Consider Joseph's explanation of his sufferings (Gen 45v4-11, cf. Lam 3v28-38).
How does he explain his brother's actions?

Why did God do what he did?

List the human decisions God must have governed to get Joseph to the position he did?

Where people settle and live (Acts 17v26-28)
The rise and fall of nations (Job 12v23)
The decisions of kings (Prov 21v1, Ezr 1v1)
The heart of every individual (Ps 33v14-15)
Every day of our lives (Ps 139v16, Gal 1v15)
Every step we take (Jer 10v23, Prov 16v9)
The children we have (Ps 127v3)
Every good we experience (Jam 1v17)
Every spiritual benefit we receive (1 Co 4v7)
Every act of faithfulness we commit (Phil 2v13)
Natural and human effort in bringing us food (Matt 6v11)
Yet also whether we succeed or fail (Lk 1v52)
The calamities we face (Lam 3v38, Amos 3v6, Is 45v7)
Deception amongst his people (1 Kgs 22v23)
The hardness of hearts against him (Ex 14v17, Is 63v17, Rom 9v18, 1 Pet 2v8)
Our evil deeds (Jud 14v4, 1 Sam 2v25)
The work of Satan and demons (1 Sam 16v14, 2 Sam 24v1 with 1 Chr 21v1)

1) God's sovereignty and human responsibility

Consider King David (Ps 139v13-16)

Further distinctions in providence:

- 1) God's direction of impersonal agents – which simply act as God directly or indirectly causes
- 2) God's direction of "free" agents – whose endeavours he (1) prompts, (2) permits and (3) contains so that they freely choose just as he wills (prompts: 2 Sam 24v1, 1 Chr 21v1; permits: Job 1v6-12, Lk 8v32; contains: Job 13v27, Num 22v12-13)

1) God's moral will – what "should be" and may not be done (his pleasure)

2) God's sovereign will – what "shall be" and will definitely come to pass (his providence)

"God is often pleased to ordain his own displeasure."
(<http://www.samstorms.com/all-articles/post/are-there-two-wills-in-god/>)

Proverbs 21v1 says: *"In the LORD's hand the king's heart is a stream of water that he channels towards all who please him."*

Thinking on the illustration of channelling water:

- 1) In what ways might the water be controlled?
- 2) In what sense is it nevertheless free?

Biblically then, freedom is not the ability to act in a way that is independent of anything else. Our decisions are quite obviously determined by all sorts of factors. Rather, whatever influences may move us to act as we do, freedom is the ability to do what we want. It is this freedom that God ensures, whilst also utilizing it, so that our free choices are those he has ordained and brought to pass by his governance of whatever may influence us – whether externally or internally.

“The Scriptures attribute all that is good in man to God; these “he works in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” All the sins which men commit the Scriptures attribute wholly to the man himself. Yet God’s permissive decree does truly determine the certain futurity of the act; because God knowing certainly that the man in question would in the given circumstances so act, did place that very man in precisely those circumstances that he should so act. But in neither case, whether in working the good in us, or in placing us where we will certainly do the wrong, does God in executing his purpose ever violate or restrict the perfect freedom of the agent.”

Hodge, AA. *Outlines of theology*, (London, Banner of Truth, 1879), p.210

2) God’s sovereignty and human evil (John Frame)

“We find in Scripture not a philosophical solution to the problem, but a great reassurance, a powerful motivation to keep trusting and obeying, despite all the wickedness of the world.”¹

1. God does not defend himself
2. Rather he affirms that he does as he pleases
3. Nevertheless he has revealed he uses evil for good ends
4. He has vindicated his justice and goodness, and especially in the cross
5. So he gives us sufficient reasons to trust him whatever is faced

Good God works through evil include:

1. Displaying his grace and justice (Rom 3v26)
2. Bringing judgement upon evil (Matt 23v35)
3. Working redemption (1 Pet 3v18, Col 1v24)
4. Shocking unbelievers to promote a change of heart (Lk 13v1-5)
5. Disciplining believers (Heb 12)
6. Shaping believers into the likeness of Christ (Rom 5v3-5, 8v18-29)
7. Vindicating God’s character (Rom 3v26)

Conclusion – 3 theological ideas:

1) God has **“decreed”** all that comes to pass - ie. he has sovereignly ordained everything that happens like a king decreeing something must happen (Lam 3v37).

2) He does this in such a way that ensures human beings are free in the sense that they enjoy a **“freedom of spontaneity”** – we are able to do what we want to do. But they do not have a **“freedom of indifference”** – the ability to act in a way that is independent of causation.

3) This means that we live in a **“risk free universe”** in the sense that nothing happens that is not somehow part of God’s faultless purposes which can never therefore be thwarted (Eph 1v11).

¹ Frame, John M. *Apologetics to the glory of God*, (Philipsburg, P&R, 1994), p.189

B) Predestination (God choosing in advance who will be saved)

Key characters God calls are Abraham, Jacob and Paul. What do we know of character when called? What do we know of their faith after being called?

Romans 9v1-21

- 1) People do not belong to God's people by descent (v6-7)
- 2) This is proved by God choosing Isaac and Jacob over their brothers (v8-12)
- 3) God specifically did not choose them on the basis of any good they might do (v11-13)
- 4) This was so that his purpose might depend solely on his call and not human beings (v11)
- 5) This is not unjust as God has the right to show mercy to whom he pleases (v14-15)
- 6) Being one of God's people therefore depends on God not human will or effort (v16)
- 7) Indeed, he shows mercy and hardens people as he wills (v17-18)
- 8) We cannot blame him for unbelief because he has the right to do as he pleases (v19-21)

John 6v37-40

- 1) There is a group of people the Father gives to Christ
- 2) Every one of them will come to him
- 3) Every one of them will be raised on the last day
- 4) Therefore God ensures they believe and keep believing
- 5) Those who do not believe do not because God hasn't enabled them (v64-65)

Qualifications:

- God does not make people reject Christ but at most hardens their own disposition (2 Thess 2v10-12) – God cannot therefore be blamed for unbelief
- He nevertheless renews the wills of those he has chosen so that they will willingly embrace Christ (2 Cor 4v3-6) – we cannot therefore boast in our belief

Why is this good news?

Appendix: The Sovereignty of God

Sovereignty means kingly rule. God rules everything; not one atom is outside his control (Ephesians 1:11).

Providence

Providence refers to the fact that God not only keeps our universe running (Hebrews 1:3), but ensures that every event within it conforms to his will—every random reaction (Proverbs 16:33, Matthew 10:29-30), and every moment of every life (Psalm 139:16). Even suffering (Isaiah 45:7), unbelief (John 6:65, 2 Thessalonians 2v11-12, 1 Peter 2v8), and other evil thoughts and acts (Exodus 4:21, Genesis 50:20) are somehow predetermined by him. Indeed, Satan can only cause such things by God's will (Job 1-2). Theologians therefore say that God is the primary cause of all that happens. Whereas whatever we would regard as causes, such as the properties of the atom, the biology of life, our own decisions or the acts of Satan are actually secondary causes that God is using to fulfil his purposes.

Three things need remembering: First, we remain free and responsible (Romans 2:6-8). In his infinite wisdom God so orders things that our response to them is at the same time a willing response, but also the response he has determined. So we are not free to do other than God has decided, but are free in the sense that whatever we do is still what we want to do. Second, it would be outrageous if God did not take such control. He could not then answer prayer, there would be no limit to wickedness, and even Christ's victory would not be certain (Daniel 4:35). Third, God alone has the knowledge and right to permit or provoke suffering and evil without actually doing wrong. His motives are always pure (Genesis 50:19-20), and the greater good he intends always warrants what he determines (Romans 8:28). This good may be to exercise a deserved punishment (Isaiah 10:5-6), to strengthen or display the faith of his people (Hebrews 12:4-11, Job 1-2), to achieve someone's salvation (Genesis 50:20, Acts 2:23), or make us appreciate our own (Romans 8:19-25, 9:22-24). Of course we will rarely know God's reasons, but are simply called to submit to his will (Daniel 4:35), trust his goodness, and humbly admit our own limited understanding (Prov 3:5-6, Job 42:1-5).

This understanding of providence is known as compatibilism. This refers to the fact that human responsibility is compatible with divine sovereignty. Calvin himself wrote: "The question of free will does not depend on whether we can accomplish what we will, but whether we can will freely."²[39] So however God ensures that we always act according to his purposes, he does so by utilising the "free" desires of our wills, arousing or tempering them, and then permitting, strengthening, or prohibiting their endeavours. We therefore act only because we choose to, and God is not accountable for any evil in this action because his purpose and intent is always good, and he is the remote primary cause rather than the nearer cause of it.

One alternative propounded is that we are free in a way that is independent of God's predetermined will, and that, as in a chess game, God therefore has to make moves in response to ours to ensure his purposes are ultimately fulfilled. The problems with this view are that it simply doesn't do justice to the biblical teaching outlined above. Moreover, it is an horrific scenario, because it means that God cannot intervene in people's lives directly. Prayer is therefore pointless and there can be no certainty that God will overcome evil in the end.

Another is that knowing what people would do under every possible circumstance, God created the best possible universe he could, given the choices they would make. But this too doesn't fit the biblical picture in which God is continually directing events and causing people to do things they wouldn't otherwise do. He is not subject to their free choices, but rouses, restrains or redirects them – directing the heart like a channel of water (Prov 21v1). Otherwise praying for him to intervene in people's lives is pointless because he might not be able to get them to choose other than they are.

² Calvin, J. *Institutes of Christian Religion, Book 2, Chapter IV, Question 8*

Predestination

Providence demonstrates that God loves everybody. We deserve nothing from him except death and hell (Romans 6:23, 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10), yet he providentially provides for and gives much happiness to all—whether they acknowledge him or not (Matthew 5:44-45, Romans 9:22). Yet God loves some in a special way, by choosing to save them whilst leaving others in their unbelief (John 6:65). This is predestination, the category of providence referring to who is and isn't saved.

Faith is the one act God's general providence can never ensure: People love sin so much that without a direct work of the Spirit they will never willingly express their freedom and responsibility in accepting Christ (Romans 8:7-8, John 6:65, 1 Corinthians 2:14). God therefore renews the wills of his elect so that when hearing the gospel they do, definitely and willingly, freely and responsibly, repent and believe (Romans 8:9-11, John 6:43). So our salvation is utterly by grace. Even our faith is God's gift (Ephesians 2:8-9). He didn't choose us because we first chose him; we chose him because he first chose us (Romans 9:10-24). We might define predestination then as the decision by God before all time as to whether to save an individual or leave them in their unbelief.

In John 6v37 Jesus states: "All that the Father gives me will come to me." He then reassures his hearers in v39 that "I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day." He then elaborates in v44: "No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." The argument is not unclear: There is a group of people that the Father has given to the Son. Every one of them will be saved on the last day because the Father will ensure that they come to and stick with Jesus in faith. This is made most explicit in v65 where Jesus explains why many who claimed to believe stopped doing so when they found his teaching too difficult: "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him." The reason for their falling away was that the Father had never actually enabled them to truly believe!

Now three important qualifications need to be made to protect against misunderstanding: First, predestination doesn't make evangelism unnecessary, because God works out what he has predestined through it. He draws people to Christ through the preaching of the gospel brought home by his Spirit. Second, predestination alone actually makes prayer worthwhile, because we know that God really can intervene to save those we pray for, having incorporated our prayers into his purposes. Third, predestination doesn't make it God's fault that some don't believe. He certainly does ensure Christians accept Jesus, but he does not make non-Christians reject him. They do so because of their own hardness of heart.

What if we struggle with all this?

In one sense a certain struggle with predestination is a godly response. God himself takes no "pleasure in the death of the wicked" but desires that they "turn from their ways and live" (Ezekiel 23:32). It is therefore actually God-like to want all to be saved and to be distraught that some will not be. This is exactly Paul's response when considering the fact that God had not chosen many of his fellow Jews (Romans 9:1-3). Those Christians who assert predestination harshly and without feeling its implications therefore display a certain God-lessness themselves.

Having said this, when our struggle develops into a refusal to accept what scripture teaches on this issue, we implicitly deny God's right to do as he pleases and imply that we think him unjust. In Romans 9, Paul goes on to challenge those who expressed this sort of outrage at predestination, saying in v19-21: "who are you, O man, to talk back to God. Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"

Jesus is just as frank. After many abandoned him because they found his teaching too difficult, Jesus challenged his disciples about whether they would do the same. Yet Peter's response in John 6v68-69 is that of true faith: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." One sign of having been chosen is our

willingness to keep believing even when we find it hard.

Our understanding of the what's and why's of predestination (and providence) will always be limited. Yet whether or not we accept a difficult doctrine does not depend on whether we understand it, and certainly not on whether we like it. It depends on whether or not the Bible teaches it. It depends on the fact that Jesus is the Holy One of God, and that his words are those of eternal life. We must therefore accept what he says, and what the book he sanctioned says therefore truly reflects God's ways.

In speaking of predestination, the apostle Paul describes the mind of God as "unsearchable" and "beyond tracing out" (Romans 11:33). How ironic then, that so many reject this doctrine because they cannot search and trace out its reasoning. Instead we must remind ourselves again of God's love and goodness, but also that his ways are way above our ways, and so beyond full comprehension. Perhaps we will never know why he doesn't choose to save everyone through Christ. But what we can know, is that he must have the best of reasons, for as we've already mentioned, the Bible is clear that he takes no "pleasure in the death of the wicked" but desires that they "turn from their ways and live" (Ezekiel 23:32). The logic is compelling: God longs for all to turn and be saved, God is capable of ensuring than all turn and are saved, yet God chooses not to ensure that all turn and are saved. We can only conclude then that he must have a "greater good" in mind that supersedes even the salvation of all.

Some teach that this misunderstands predestination. They argue it is simply about God seeing in advance whether we will believe and so choosing us on this basis. But there are three substantial problems with this argument:

1. This still wouldn't get rid of the difficulty of God choosing some to be condemned, because we would still have to accept that he chooses to create people he knows will not believe. And he does not have to (Isaiah 46:9-10, Psalm 139:16).
2. We are so sinful, that we are simply unable to believe unless God enable us to. And the bible is clear that he enables only some (2 Corinthians 4:4-6, Romans 8:7-8, John 6:65, 1 Corinth 2:14-16).
3. The bible simply doesn't teach that God's choice is dependent on our faith. It does speak of God "foreknowing," but the focus of this is us as individuals, not the faith we express (Romans 8:29,11:2, 1 Peter 1:2). On the contrary, we are explicitly told that God's choice is not dependent on anything we do (Romans 9:11-18).

Others teach that God chooses Christ, and that we therefore become chosen when we believe in him. The problems here are also significant, and similar to those above.

1. It would not get rid of the difficulty of God creating those he knows will end up being condemned.
2. The bible teaches we need to be given faith to respond, and that God only gives this to some.
3. When speaking about predestination, the bible speaks of God's choice being directed to individuals not to Christ (John 6:36-70, Romans 9:6-24, Ephesians 1:3-14).