

Note: The article by John Murray that is found on pages 1–4 of this document has been shortened and slightly reworded for ease of reading. The original, full article can be found at https://www.the-highway.com/sovereignty_Murray1.html

The Sovereignty of God by John Murray

The Presuppositions of God's Sovereignty

The sovereignty of God is the absolute authority, rule, and government of God. . . The possession and exercise of this absolute authority, rule, and government are founded upon certain basic truths.

1. *Sovereignty is founded upon the oneness or Unity of God.* This truth underlies and determines the whole fabric of divine revelation, and it is a truth to which Scripture bears witness in a great variety of ways. The oneness of God does not mean mere uniqueness or supremacy in the realm of deity. It is not as if there were a host of lesser gods over whom God is supreme. It is not as if He demanded of us the highest worship in contrast with the lower worship that may be given to others. It is rather that He alone is God and that there is none else besides Him. “The LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other” (Deut. 4:35, 39). “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord” (Deut. 6:4). “See now that I, I am He, and there is no god besides Me” (Deut. 32:39). “You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth.” (II Kings 19:15).

Our responsibility to God is based on His oneness. When our Lord was asked the question, “What commandment is first of all?”, He answered, “The first is, Hear O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord”. And so the consequence for us is, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:28-30). “You shall worship the Lord your God, and you shall serve him only” (Matt. 4:10).

Our salvation also is based on the fact that God is one and that there is none else besides Him. This is shown, for example, by the way in which the Apostle Paul supports the doctrine of justification by appeal to the oneness of God. “Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. (Rom. 3:29, 30).

The logic is simple and irresistible. God is sovereign in the realms of nature and grace and this sovereignty belongs to Him because He is one, without peer or rival.

2. *The sovereignty of God is also founded upon the self-existence of God.* Since God is one and there is none else besides Him, He does not owe His existence to any other. Indeed, origin cannot be applied to Him. His existence is without beginning and eternal. “Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.” (Psalm 90:2). Our finite minds stagger when we try to bring such a truth within our comprehension. We cannot comprehend it; it is too high and we cannot attain unto it. But we must humbly and even joyfully receive it. God is without origin, and He is not dependent upon any for His eternal and immutable being.

3. *The sovereignty of God is founded upon the self-sufficiency of God.* Not only is He self-existent but He is to Himself sufficient. He does not need any created existence to complete His perfection and blessedness. Created reality is not a necessity arising from His being but an effect resultant upon His sovereign will.

4. *The sovereignty of God is also founded upon the fact of creation.* Creation means simply the origination of all other existence by the command of God. The moment we admit the existence of anything apart from God's will as the principle of its origin, in that moment we have denied the absoluteness of the divine authority and rule.

The witness of Scripture to the originative action of God in creation is very abundant. Perhaps no word expresses it more pointedly than that of the psalm, "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth" (Psalm 33:6). The import of this text is that the word or breath of God — breath being the symbol of His almighty creative will — is the first cause of all that is. "For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast" (vs. 9). This mode of statement reminds us of the first chapter of Genesis where on repeated occasions we have the formula, "And God said".

God made heaven and earth; by His Spirit the heavens were garnished; He laid the foundations of the earth; by wisdom He founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens; His hands stretched out the heavens and all their host He commanded; heaven and earth His hand made, and so all those things came to be; He is the first and the last, the Alpha and Omega; He is the beginning of creation; by His will heaven and earth were and were created. (See II Kings 19:15; Job 26:13; 38:4; Prov. 3:19; Isa. 42:5; 44:6; 45:12; 66:2; Jonah 1:9; Rev. 1:8; 3:14; 4:11.) Such expressions provide us with examples of the way in which the Scripture abounds in the teaching that God's hand and will and word are the first cause of all things.

The piety on which Scripture places its seal as true piety rests upon the recognition of God as Creator. Man's address to God in adoration, prayer, and praise begins with it; God's address to men in law and gospel rests upon it. The faith that is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen, the faith through which the catalogue of saints had witness borne to them that they were righteous, is the faith through which "we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear" (Heb. 11:3). And when Paul makes his appeal to the idolatrous Athenians that God now commands men that they should all everywhere repent, he begins his address by saying, "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24).

The Nature of God's Sovereignty

We have just found that the sovereignty of God rests upon God's oneness, God's self-existence, God's self-sufficiency, and God's creatorhood. In what does His sovereignty consist?

(1) ***God's sovereignty consists in the fact that God is the possessor of all.*** In the formula of Melchizedek and of Abraham He is "the possessor of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14: 19, 22), and the psalmist sounds this note when he says, "The earth is the LORD'S, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it" (Psalm 24:1).

(2) ***God's sovereignty consists in the right of dominion and rule over all.*** His kingdom is over all, He is the God of the whole earth, He is the Most High who rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomsoever He will (Isa. 54:5; Dan. 4:17, 25).

(3) ***God's sovereignty consists in the all-pervasive and efficient exercise of government.*** It is not simply that God is the owner of all. Nor is it simply that He has the right of dominion and rule over all. But it is that He also exercises government over all in accordance with His perfections and in accordance with the prerogatives that are His because of His ownership of all and the right of dominion over all. This sovereignty He exercises with omnipotent and irresistible efficiency. The mighty hand of God is the executor of His will. He is the great, the mighty, the terrible. He rides upon the heavens and in His excellency on the skies. There is none that can deliver out of His hand for He frustrates the devices of the crafty and the counsel of the cunning. He breaks down and it cannot be built up again. There is no wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel against Him. None can stay His hand, nor say unto Him, what are you doing? For human might is of one sort with the Egyptians, and they are men and not God, and their horses flesh and not spirit. (Deut. 10:17; 33:26; Job 5:12, 13; 12:14; Prov. 21:30; Dan. 4:35; Isa. 31:3).

We may illustrate this all-pervasive and efficient sovereignty by some of the ways in which Scripture applies it.

(a) ***God's sovereignty in respect to providence.*** It is God who gives rain upon the earth, and sends water upon the fields. He makes His sun to rise upon the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. He clothes the grass of the field, causing the grass to grow for cattle and herb for the service of man. He feeds the birds of heaven. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without His knowledge and will. He gives us our daily bread. He gives wine that makes glad the heart of man, oil that makes his face to shine, and bread that strengthens man's heart. He crowns the year with goodness and the paths drop fatness. He even gives that which is abused and used in the service of another god. He gave grain and new wine and the oil and multiplied silver and gold which they used for Baal. He makes the wind His messengers and flames of fire His ministers. The whole earth is filled with His glory. So that the pious contemplation of His working brings forth the exclamation of adoration, "O Lord, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all: the earth is full of Your riches" (Job 5:10; Matt. 5:45; Ps. 104:4; 14:24; 65:11; Hos. 2:8).

(b) ***God's sovereignty in respect to earthly authority.*** He alone is God of all the kingdoms of the earth. He removes kings and sets up kings, for as the Most High He rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomsoever He wills. He sets up over them even the lowest of men. It is He who gives even to ungodly men the kingdom, the power, the strength, and the glory. He overthrows the throne and strength of kingdoms (Deut. 4:35, 39; II Kings 5:15; 19:15; Isa. 37:16; Dan. 4:17; 5:18, 21; Hag. 2:22). . . . It is not simply, then, that the powers of civil government are ordained by God to be the ministers of equity and good and peace for the punishment of evil doers and for the praise of them that do well (Rom. 13:3; I Pet. 2:14). But it is also true that corrupt government which violates the very principles of government itself is still within the government of God and fulfils His sovereign purpose. In the doing of iniquity the wicked fill up the cup of the divine indignation. "Wherefore it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit, of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks" (Isa. 10:12).

(c) ***God's sovereignty in respect to good and evil.*** Even the sins of men come within the scope of His rule and providence. "What?" asks the oppressed and the afflicted Job, bereft of flocks and herds, and smitten with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto the crown, "shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10). For with God he says again, "With Him are wisdom and might; To Him belong counsel and understanding. Behold, He tears down, and it cannot be rebuilt; He imprisons a man, and there can be no release" (Job 12:13, 14). He forms the light and creates

darkness; He makes peace and creates evil [i.e. He creates calamity, not moral evil – Isa. 45:7]. He kills and He makes alive; He wounds and He heals (Isa. 45:7; Deut. 32:39). He “has made everything for its own end; Yes, even the wicked for the day of evil” (Prov. 16:4). “Shall evil befall a city, and the Lord has not done it?” (Amos 3:6). . . .

Perhaps most familiar to us in the matter of God’s sovereignty as it respects evil are Acts 2:23; 4:28, where the arch-crime of human history, the crucifixion of Christ, is referred to the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, and the treatment meted out to Jesus in the conspiracy devised against Him by Herod and Pontius Pilate and the Gentiles and the people of Israel is referred to as that which the hand and counsel of God foreordained to come to pass. . . .

(d) ***God’s sovereignty in respect to salvation.*** The sovereignty of God in salvation is in a unique way exemplified in God’s election of sinners to salvation. . . .

[These last two points will be expanded upon in the weeks ahead]

Romans 9:14–18

9:14 What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!

9:15 For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

9:16 So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

9:17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth."

9:18 So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

We must remember that the problem that Paul is addressing is how can so few ethnic Israelites be saved if God's word is true? Verses 6–13 have been answering that question.

It seems evident to me that Paul solves the problem by appealing to a principle according to which God always operates. The principle was manifest in the election and elevation of Jacob over Esau and explains why not all physical Israelites are spiritual Israelites. The principle, again, is this: When God determines who shall and who shall not enjoy His blessings, be they earthly or heavenly, He does so according to His sovereign good pleasure and not according to anything in men (Sam Storms).

If God is sovereign over all things, it is consistent to believe that He is also sovereign over who receives the blessings of salvation (Ro. 9:6–13). In Romans 9:6–13 God’s sovereignty was seen in that He has the absolute right and freedom to choose whom He desires and that He does so based on His own good pleasure, not human merit.

There are two plausible objections to the absolute sovereignty of God; first, it is not consistent with divine justice (Isn’t it unjust for God to choose some and not others?), and second, it is incompatible with human responsibility (How can man be held responsible if he can’t choose to believe?). The first objection is answered in verse 14, the second in verse 19.

2) God's justice with regard to Israel has not failed — 9:14–21

Isn't it unjust for God to choose some and not others?

9:14 What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!

9:15 For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

In Romans 9:6–13 Paul has shown that God chose Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau; that is, He chose some, not all, to be beneficiaries of the blessings promised to Abraham. Thus, in verse 14 Paul asks, "What shall we say then?" Is God unjust in doing this?

Whatever we may think about God choosing some and not others, Paul is clear that God is not unjust in only selecting some.

Verses 15 and 16 are extremely important; they explain how God is not unjust. These verses operate under the assumption that the human race is guilty and condemned. In other words, God is not dealing with a morally neutral race (see Romans 1–3). If He was, the whole idea of mercy would not make sense. Mercy can only be mercy if it is shown to those who need it. Mere justice would condemn the whole race. But God goes beyond mere justice and He shows mercy and compassion upon millions of people who don't deserve it. It is not unjust to show mercy.

The OT is full of examples where God extended mercy to some when all deserved judgment. For example, in Exodus 32 the Israelites were involved in idolatry and all deserved to be judged. God, however, only destroyed 3,000 (Exo. 32:28) and had mercy on the rest by allowing them to live (Exo. 33:19). If God hadn't had mercy, the entire nation would have ceased to exist.

Anyone who objects to God having mercy on some needs to understand that if it were not for mercy, all would be judged.

Paul concludes,

9:16 So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

In the case of Jacob and Esau, we see that mercy was selective (9:10–13). Though neither of the brothers deserved mercy, God chose to give mercy to Jacob. Jacob did nothing to deserve being chosen; it even says he was chosen before he was born or had done anything good or bad. Esau had done nothing that demonstrated he was worse than Jacob. The only difference was that Jacob was shown mercy and Esau was not. To give mercy to one when both deserve judgment is not unjust.

What is true of them is true of everyone. Nowhere is this truth so plainly and directly affirmed as in John 1:12, 13.

John 1:12–13

1:12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,

1:13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

As Murray says,

The three negations of the former passage — “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man” — are cumulative in their effect, and the implication is that in the whole realm of nature there is no element, impulse, instinct, desire, volition or purpose, and no combination or collusion of these, that will produce “sons of God”.

These negations are, however, followed by an affirmation that is placed in sharp antithesis to what is denied — “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God”, The force of the affirmation is that the kind of birth that is to produce sons of God, that is to issue in the reception of Christ and abiding trust in His name, is birth from God. Of this birth God is the agent and God alone. The eloquent accumulation of negatives by which the affirmation is preceded excludes human determination and volition as in any way capable of effecting this supernatural result. It is not wrought by convergence of divine and human factors. God is the agent without cooperation on the part of man. The intrusion of a humanly decisive factor would nullify the force of the antithesis expressed by the negations, “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man”, on the one hand, and by the affirmation, “but of God”, on the other.

Romans 9:16 states the principle: God’s favor is not received because of man’s desire to receive it. It is not “man who wills” (that is, it is not the result of man’s will or volition) or “man who runs” (it is not gained by man’s active exertion or his efforts to obtain it) but it is God alone who decides who will receive mercy.

9:17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth."

God’s dealings with Pharaoh also show that God is not unjust in showing mercy to some and not others. Pharaoh, like Jacob, is an example of selective mercy; but the story of Pharaoh describes a situation where mercy was not given.

Pharaoh was not a worse person than people who had received mercy, but for His own holy reasons God chose to withhold mercy from him. God did not make Pharaoh wicked, but He did nothing to make him good. God placed such a man in power and sustained his life in order to display His power in the miraculous deliverance of Israel from the Egyptians. By means of the many plagues He visited upon the Egyptians and the defeat of the Egyptian armies in the Red Sea, His name spread to all the earth (Exo. 15:13–16). In this case, God’s plan foreordained that God would be glorified when mercy was not given.

9:18 So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

The OT texts that speak of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart are expressed in three different ways: (1) Pharaoh hardened his heart (Exo. 8:15, 32; 9:34), (2) Pharaoh’s heart was hardened (Exo. 7:13, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35), and (3) God hardened Pharaoh’s heart (Exo. 9:12; 10:1, 20; 11:10; 14:8). We see in this that God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility go hand and hand; they do not contradict each other. Pharaoh is accountable (he hardened his own heart), and yet God is still sovereign (God hardened Pharaoh’s heart). Once again the fall of man is assumed. God isn’t making neutral people sinners.

God's judicial sentence was fair—Pharaoh deserved to be condemned; but it was God's choice to condemn him; He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

Even in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, the conclusion is the same; it isn't in man's power to obtain mercy. All that Pharaoh could do was to continue in his wicked path, and God allowed him to do just that. It should be remembered that men are not lost because they are hardened, they are hardened because they are lost (Fruchtenbaum).

To summarize: Paul has shown that Israel's rejection wasn't because the word of God had failed or the gospel was untrue, but because Israel had failed to believe. God had not shown mercy to all of Abraham's descendants; He has the absolute right and freedom to choose whom He gives His promises. In verses 14–18 Paul has shown that this is consistent with divine justice. God is not unjust to show mercy or withhold it. That is, giving men something they don't deserve (mercy) is not unjust; withholding what they don't deserve (mercy) is not unjust either. Justice is giving men what they *do* deserve; judgment is just.

Next, in verses 19–24 Paul will show that such action is compatible with human responsibility and will answer the question, "How can man be held responsible if he can't choose to believe?"