

THE SOVEREIGNTY of GOD & HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

The relationship of God's sovereignty (i.e. His absolute rule or control over all things) to human responsibility has been debated for centuries. Some see the two as being mutually exclusive. That is, they believe that it is impossible to say that God controls all things and at the same time claim that humans are morally responsible. However, it appears that any responsible reading of the Scripture reveals that both truths are taught. The following statements clarify my position.

1. God is absolutely sovereign, but His sovereignty never functions in Scripture to reduce human responsibility.

2. Human beings are responsible creatures - that is, they choose, they believe, they disobey, they respond, and there is moral significance in their choices, but human responsibility never functions in Scripture to diminish God's sovereignty.

The problem we face is not in finding ample examples that support these statements, but in believing that both are true.

EXAMPLES:**GENESIS 50:19-20**

The story of Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers and rising to power is well known (Gen. 37, 41). It was through the event that God preserved the Messianic line through Judah (Gen. 49:10) and the nation of Israel as a whole (Genesis 45:5-8).

When Jacob, their father, had died the brothers were afraid that Joseph would take revenge on them for the evil they had done to him. Joseph responded by saying, "Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as *it is* this day, to save many people alive (Gen. 50:19-20)..

Note how Joseph insists that his brothers intended evil and God intended good. God's sovereignty over the event does not reduce the brothers' evil, nor do their evil actions make God any less sovereign. The same event involved two different purposes and two different wills. Both human responsibility and divine sovereignty are assumed.

II SAMUEL 24

II Samuel 24:1 states that God moved David to number the people. David then did the prohibited action, called it "his" sin (II Sam. 24:10) and was faced with the judgment of God (II Sam. 24:12 ff.) The result was that seventy thousand people died (II Sam. 24:14-15).

It is important to remember that God is good, perfectly good. Deuteronomy 32:4 says, "He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He. "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all" (I Jn. 1:5). He alone is holy (Rev. 15:4).

Yet on the other hand, there are many passages that present God as being behind evil in some way. In II Thessalonians 2:11 God sends a strong delusion so that people believe the great lie. He causes Ahab's prophets to prophesy lies (I Ki. 22:21 ff.). He is the One who is behind Job's suffering. None of this evil just "happens" leaving God surprised or forced to make some unexpected disaster into something good. All things, even evil, are under God's control.

It is helpful to read I Chronicles 21 which is a parallel account of II Samuel 24. There it states that *Satan* moved David to number the people (I Chron. 21:1), not God. This is not a contradiction though it is a change in emphasis. Satan moves David, but God controls Satan. The same could be said of the calamities that hit Job (Job 1:8-12; 2:3-6). Satan does as He desires (God isn't forcing him to act) but God sets parameters on what Satan can do. In the same way Satan doesn't make David act, rather, David consents to

Satan's promptings willfully. It could either be said that God afflicted Job or Satan afflicted Job, or that God moved David or that Satan moved David. In a sense both are true. There are primary and secondary causes.

The point here is that God is sovereign over David's life, including the sin in his life, but David is not excused for his actions. Both human responsibility and divine sovereignty are assumed to be true.

ISAIAH 10:5-19

The passage in Isaiah 10 is typical of many prophetic passages where God uses a pagan nation to punish His people for their sin. Yet, as in many similar passages, God also pronounces judgment on the punishing nation. In this case, His punishment is directed toward Assyria because they were proud and thought that they were conquering Jerusalem all by themselves. Therefore God says to Assyria, "Shall the ax boast itself against him who chops with it? Or shall the saw exalt itself against him who saws with it? As if a rod could wield itself against those who lift it up, or as if a staff could lift up, as if it were not wood! Therefore the Lord, the Lord of hosts, Will send leanness among his fat ones; And under his glory He will kindle a burning like the burning of a fire" (Isa. 10:15-16).

Here God is using a military superpower like an ax or a saw to accomplish His judgment, but that doesn't mean that the Assyrians are not responsible for their actions. Their "willful pride," their "haughty look," and their arrogance will be judged. They may be tools in His hands, but they are not absolved of their responsibility. They were not willfully acting as God's tool to accomplish His purposes; in fact, they would have despised the thought. Rather, they had their own purposes in mind.

JOHN 6:37-44

Jesus declared, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (Jn. 6:37). This means that the Father gives people to Christ and that Jesus will never turn them away. This meaning is even more apparent in verses 38-39 where Jesus says, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day."

Again, verse 44 says, "'No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.'" The Father does not beckon or advise; He draws.

Thus, God is seen as sovereign in salvation. This does not mean that man is absolved of responsibility for 6:40 states, "'And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day."

The three verses (6:39, 40, 44) are nearly parallel in thought. Those who the Father gives to the Son may equally be described as those who see and believe in the Son. John is not embarrassed by this, because unlike many theologians and philosophers today, he does not see a contradiction between sovereignty and responsibility. He can speak with equal ease about both.

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13

"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to work [i.e. God is the One who produces both the will to work and the working itself; cf. Phil. 1:6] for His good pleasure."

In order to understand what Paul is saying it helps to think about what he is not saying. He is not telling the readers to do their part in their salvation since God has done His. Nor is he telling them that God has done everything so they can be supremely passive. Rather, he tells them to work out their salvation *because* God is working in them.

Not only does God’s sovereignty extend so far that it includes our will and our actions (“both to will and to work”) but His sovereignty is the incentive for our own effort!

CONCLUSION:

1. “Free will”

Many people think that for humans to be morally responsible they must be free to do as they please (free to choose, believe, disobey, etc.). In addition, people are tempted to think that this freedom somehow works outside of God’s sovereignty. They reason that if man must choose a certain option he is not choosing at all. And if he is not choosing, how can he be held responsible for what he does?

But human **responsibility** is not tied to freedom. **It is related to desire**. It is true that David did what God had determined him to do, but he also did what he wanted to do! Joseph’s brothers did what they wanted to do; the Assyrians did what they wanted to do. In each case God was working behind the scenes, but that does not excuse the people involved, for they all did exactly what they willfully chose to do. In other words, God isn’t forcing men to commit evil, they willfully sin.

Thus the issue of human responsibility isn’t related to an ability to choose between good and evil. Men habitually choose evil (Ro. 3:10-12). Rather the issue is that if an individual sins voluntarily, he is morally responsible for his actions.

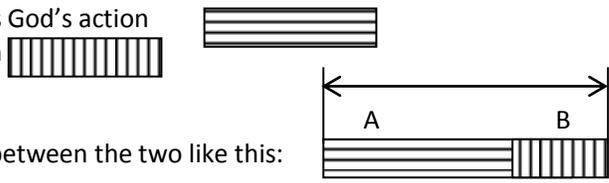
2. God’s relation to good and evil are not the same

God is sovereign, so sovereign that nothing takes place outside of His control; but he is also good, unreservedly good, the very standard of goodness. Therefore one must conclude that God’s relationship to good and evil is not the same. God stands behind good in such a way that all goodness can be credited to Him, but all evil is accredited to secondary agents. Satan had no power over Job without God’s sanction, but God nevertheless remains mysteriously distant from evil itself.

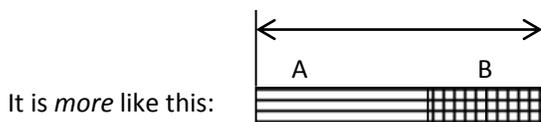
3. God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are directly tied to the nature of God

Perhaps the following diagrams will help to understand how God’s sovereignty and human responsibility work together.

The distance between A and B (below) represents the action that must be taken to bring about a particular effect. This pattern represents God’s action and this pattern represents man’s action



I *wouldn't* see the relationship between the two like this:



If God were only sovereign and nothing more, it would be difficult to find a place for any meaningful human interaction with Him, let alone find a place for human responsibility. If God were only personal and no more – talking to us, responding to us, answering our questions – it would be easy to see how people are responsible to Him, but hard to grasp how He could be all powerful, sovereign and exalted above all creation. The wonderful truth is that God is both personal and sovereign.

4. God's will

The "will of God" needs to be understood from two perspectives.

- 1) God's "will" can refer to His revealed will, that is, His moral will. This is the will of God we see in His commands in Scripture.
- 2) We also see God's will in terms of a decree or purpose. This is what God has ordained shall happen.

One must reckon with the fact that God may decree something to occur that He has forbidden elsewhere in Scripture. That is to say, His sovereign will may have ordained that something occur, though elsewhere He has forbidden it.

I believe that the easiest way to understand this is by thinking of the death of Christ.

ACTS 4:23-30

The prayers of the Christians in Acts 4:24 begin by recognizing the sovereignty of God over all creation. The prayer continues in verse 25 with a prophecy from Psalm 2:2 which speaks of the opposition of the nations to Messiah. In verse 27, Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel are identified as fulfilling this prophecy. But even though they are blamed for Messiah's death, the prayer concludes by stating that they only did what God willed to happen (4:28).

In other words, the death of Christ on the cross was no accident. It was what God had determined to happen. Even so, this does not leave those who killed Christ free from any guilt for their involvement. It does not mean that it is morally okay to kill the Messiah because God ordained it to happen. Rather, God ordained that the sin of man be allowed to run its course (contrary to His moral will which forbids murder), in order that the death of the Son might bring salvation to a dying world (Genesis 50:20 above illustrates a similar idea).

Another verse to think about is 1 Thessalonians 4:3, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality." Here it is clear that God's moral will is that people abstain from sexual immorality. Since God is all-powerful and sovereign, He could easily enforce His will so immorality would cease to exist. Nevertheless, we know that it does. This can only mean that God sovereignly allows people to fulfill the evil desires of their heart, though it is contrary to His moral demands.

We are also told that God's revealed will is that all be saved (I Tim. 2:4) and that all "come to repentance" (II Pet. 3:9). Yet we know that not all will be saved. The only explanation we can offer is that God has a reason for not saving everyone though it is contrary to His desire.

I believe that John Frame sums it up well, "God's will is sometimes thwarted because He wills it to be, because He has given one of His desires precedence over another" (John Frame; No Other God, 113).