

SERMON NOTES

SERIES: Join the Conversation Part 2
TITLE: Sovereignty and Free Will
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PASTOR: Charlie Boyd

We are in our series called Join the Conversation: Part 2. The first installment was aimed at engaging with those who may have some strong skepticism towards Christianity, people who might get frazzled at how some Christians think about hell, homosexuality, science, and so on. We encourage you to go listen to, watch, and share those previous sermons at our web site.

This installment has a slightly different focus: Christians in dialogue with other Christians over 'tougher questions' that are often misunderstood or interpreted differently. The purpose of this series is not to answer every single question, but to help you see the value of these discussions and then take part in them.

In this message, we start the conversation about sovereignty and free will.

A.W. Tozer once said, **"What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."**

Most Christians want a God we can understand, a God we can explain, a God that gives us slick answers without a hint of uncertainty.

The Bible does not give us neat and tidy answers that give us immunity from the troubling questions of faith.

In his book, *Paradoxology: Why Christianity Was Never Meant to Be Simple*, Dr. Krish Kandiah writes,

"It is often in the mysteries of life that we learn most about the mysteries of God. It is the very paradoxes of Scripture that help us come to God most effectively when life itself is a paradox."

He goes on to say, **"A paradox, just to be clear, consists of true statements that lead to an apparent or real contradiction in logic or intuition."**

Dealing with Paradoxes

The paradoxes we encounter when we try to understand who God is and how God works in our lives and in this world are not always easy to resolve. Paradoxes like:

- How can God be up close and personal and far away and distant at the same time?
- How can God be loving, but allow terrible suffering in the world, and in the Bible, even be the cause of terrible suffering?
- How can Jesus be fully God and fully human at the same time?
- If Jesus is God does that mean God died on the cross?

The biggest paradox of all is this: If God is sovereign and in control of the universe, do humans really have free will? If humans have free will to do as they please, can God really be in control?

How can God be sovereign and at the same time allow for people to make meaningful, life-changing choices? When it comes to salvation, do people have a choice or has God predetermined some to be saved and others to be lost?

Calvinism vs. Arminianism

Theologians have debated questions like these for centuries. *Calvinism* emphasizes God's sovereignty, whereas *Arminianism* emphasizes human free will. Both "sides" love God and believe his word, but each emphasizes different parts of it, feeling they have all of their supporting arguments tied up into neat, tidy theological packages.

Even though we as humans struggle with how sovereignty and free will work together, in God's infinite mind, they coexist in perfect harmony.

Two More Helpful Resources Related to the Discussion of Sovereignty and Free Will:

- *Hand in Hand: The Beauty of God's Sovereignty and Meaningful Human Choice*, by Randy Alcorn
- *Chosen But Free*, by Norman Geisler

This topic has been one of the most debated theological issues in the church for hundreds of years. Randy Alcorn puts it, **"Any of us can 'prove' nearly anything using some passages of Scripture, as long as we leave out other passages."**

The relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility is not an either/or, it is both/and. We must not make God's sovereignty dependent on man's free will (as some Arminians do), nor should we neglect our responsibility because of God's sovereignty (as some Calvinists do).

Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

1. The biblical basis for divine sovereignty.

- **Job 42:2** I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
- **Psalms 115:3** Our God is in heaven, he does all that he pleases.
- **Psalms 135:6** Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and in earth, in the sea and in all the deeps.
- **Isaiah 14:24** The Lord of Hosts has sworn: as I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand.
- **Revelation 4:11** Worthy are you, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for you created all things, and because of your will they existed, and were created.

The Bible makes it unmistakably clear that God is sovereign over all creation and human history. He does what he pleases in heaven and earth and is working out a predetermined plan in the world.

He is also sovereign over salvation.

- **Ephesians 1:4-6** Just as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.
- **Ephesians 1:11** Also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to his purpose who works all things after the counsel of his will.
- **Acts 13:48** And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

In all of life in this world, God is sovereign.

2. The biblical basis for human responsibility.

- **Genesis 2:16** The Lord God commanded the man saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it, you will surely die."
- **Genesis 3:13** Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this *you* have done?"
- **Genesis 3:17** Because *you* have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, "You shall not eat from it."
- **Acts 16:31** Believe in the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved.
- **Acts 17:30** Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring that all people everywhere should repent.
- **John 3:18** He who believes in him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

- **John 3:36** He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.
- **Luke 13:5** Jesus said, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

The Bible affirms *both* divine sovereignty and human responsibility before and after the fall. These are parallel truths, side-by-side in Scripture and any view that rejects one for the other or one over the other is unbiblical.

How do these two truths relate to one another?

1. **God's sovereign will is the source and basis for salvation.**

- **John 1:13** who were born not out of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.
- **Romans 9:16** So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.
- **Ephesians 1:11** we were chosen according to his purpose who works all things after the counsel of his will.

God's election is *not* based on God's foreknowledge of our free choices.

2. **Our free response of faith is the condition for receiving salvation.**

Salvation is not something we earn through effort or work.

- **John 1:12** But to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God.
- **2 Peter 3:9** The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.
- **Matthew 23:37** Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.
- **Acts 7:51** You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit.

Scripture continuously calls and commands both non-believers and believers to make meaningful choices; and continuously describes them as making choices.

God is the *source* of our salvation; faith is the condition for *receiving* salvation. We are free enough to make meaningful, life-changing choices for which we are morally accountable, but not free enough to make ourselves righteous before God.

Matthew 16:19 states this relationship between sovereignty and responsibility in a beautiful way:

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

We make decisions on earth that have already been decided in heaven. God has sovereignly determined that we can make meaningful choices—destiny shaping choices.

Acts 2:23 puts both these truths side-by-side and sees no contradiction in doing so:

This man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put him to death.

God determines, we decide. We decide what God has determined. It's both/and, not either/or.

God has predetermined to gift us free will.

If God is truly sovereign, he can determine that we can make free choices that don't interfere with his predetermined plans and purposes, even if those choices go against what God wants us to do.

A life of faith is not defined by our weakest moments.

When we face things in the Christian life that we don't completely understand, whether it is in the paradoxes of Scripture or in difficult times of life when we don't have all the answers we think we need, a life of faith means *we simply hold on to what we know is true about God*. We trust him when we don't have the answers we think we need.

It's in that trust that we grow to see God clearly and love him most dearly.

For Discussion:

1. Have you ever struggled with the desire solve a paradox of faith, like this topic? Were you tempted to portion off a section of Scripture to prove your point?
2. Do you ever think of the little choices in your life, that, even though you made them, God predetermined those choices?
3. In what ways can you remind yourself of the truth of God when you are facing a difficult choice, knowing that no matter what, God's plans cannot be thwarted?