

God's Sovereignty and the Free Will of Mankind

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The Problem: Are All Events in Nature and History the Fulfillment of the Sovereign Plan of a Perfectly Wise and Omnipotent God, or Does Mankind Exercise an Aspect of Free Will?

Alternate Church Interpretations

The sovereignty of God (how God predetermines the course and purposes regarding His creation) and the free will of man have been a centerpiece of discussion in Christianity throughout much of her history. This chapter will consider the tension between the sovereignty of God and free will of mankind. It also considers the role of evil and its relationship to God and mankind.

Pelagian and Liberal Traditions - These forms of thinking give less weight to God's sovereignty and more to mankind as the determiner of his own course for world history and the direction of God's creation. It lifts man up as the master of his own destiny and rules out a supernatural decree (decrees can be defined as God's movements regarding His predetermined master plan and the timing of the major events within His purposes for creation) that God is sovereign and is full control. It tilts heavily to man being supreme and in control and God being subservient to man's plans and decisions. It carries the idea that God created everything but is now making adjustments according to the choices of mankind.

Semi-Pelagian and Arminian Perspectives – While these perspectives are a little more balanced than the above position in that they recognize God's sovereignty more, they still give great weight to the human agent's freedom of will and less to God's decrees. They believe that God mainly operates upon foreknowledge and takes this foreknowledge into account regarding His decrees. Regarding salvation, these groups believe that God acts according to foreknowledge and that the human agent is totally free to make decisions based upon this free will. They believe that mankind is responsible for his actions and choices regarding salvation and all other matters of life. From their perspective, if God doesn't give mankind full choice then He cannot be a just God in sending them to hell or in giving them consequences for their sinful choices. According to this view, it makes God out as unjust and responsible for sin and violates His goodness and love.

Supralapsarian Hypotheses – This view tilts entirely to God being in full control over both creation and mankind. It holds that God has predetermined all things according to His logical purposes and mankind has little or no say in his free choices. It removes much, if not all, of mankind's free will. This view holds that if God were to grant humans individual freedom, it would undermine the certainty of His purposes and decrees for creation. It also believes that God decreed the eternal damnation of souls before creating them and decided ahead of time who would be saved and who wouldn't. This view gives little or no freedom

to the human agent in regards to salvation and human choice in general. It tilts heavily towards the belief that mankind is more like a puppet marching in order to God's predetermined plans rather than a being with a free will. Those who hold part are all of this view are theologians like; Martin Luther, John Calvin, Modern Dutch Reformed theology and others.

The main passage that is used for Supralapsarianism or more commonly known as Calvinism (which believes that God predetermines who will be saved before they are created and only calls those He has predetermined to salvation and then sends the rest to hell as He has predetermined them to damnation) is Romans chapters 9-11. These chapters, however, seem to be speaking about God's big decrees and plans regarding the nation of Israel and not lesser decrees for each person or individual that has ever lived. We'll talk about God's big and smaller decrees later. Pages 295-297

Barthian Neoorthodoxy – Karl Barth took the views of Supralapsarianism and claimed to purify them. His view holds a kind of double predestination beginning with Christ as both rejected regarding sin and elected regarding salvation. His intent was to replace the absolute decree regarding God's predestination of souls held by Augustine and Calvin and replace it with a more dynamic decree like that of Christ. So in summary, God has both rejected and elected each one for salvation, so both aspects are true at the same time, and it depends on the choice of each person as to which applies to him or not.

The Infralapsarian of Some Fathers, Medieval Authorities, Reformers, and Many Evangelicals – While many of the early church fathers stressed the role of free will for the human agent, other fathers and medieval reformers like Anselm and Aquinas, some later reformers like Melancthon and then many Orthodox Evangelicals like Charles Hodge, J. I. Packer, and Carl Henry, believe that God has decreed some things unconditionally (or in other words, with absoluteness so as to leave no room for change within them by any being or human agent), and other things like salvation, marriage, careers and etc. as conditionally (or in other words, as giving freedom of will to the human agent to act as they choose). Within this view is a balance of both absolute control of some aspects of creation by God and the free exercise of mankind's free will within other aspects. Here's a quote by Anselm of Canterbury that sums up some of the thinking regarding this group of theologians, "Remove grace, and you have nothing whereby to be saved. Remove free will and you have nothing that could be saved."

While much of the discussion of God's sovereignty and mankind's free will have centered on salvation (with Calvinism and Arminianism as the two opposing views), this chapter deals with the even bigger picture of God's sovereignty and mankind's free will regarding all issues of God's creation.

Following is a helpful statement regarding the tension between the sovereignty of God and the free will of created beings:

The issues involved are God's eternal decrees and man's will – how can the one be affirmed without denying the other. If one argues for God's predetermination of mankind's fate, this tends to deny mankind's free will and threatens to make God responsible for sin. On the other hand, if one argues for the freedom of mankind's

will, thus making man responsible for sin, this can threaten the sovereignty and power of God since his decrees then are contingent upon mankind's decisions. ¹

The question is a good one and deserves careful consideration. Both sides of the tension are seen in Scripture, and I believe both can be true at the same time. It's not necessarily a one or the other reality. Following I would offer the balanced view, I see in Scripture.

A good illustration of this view would be that of a wide river. God has determined the banks of each side of the river and maintains absolute control over the course and flow of it, yet within the banks of the river is water which can move about with a certain amount of freedom. The banks of the river represent the big decrees of God. The big decrees are represented as the banks of the river and would be such things like; the creation of the heavens and the earth, the master plan or course of God's plan for His creation, the creation of all created beings with a free will to choose between right and wrong (Garden of Eden), the great flood, choosing of Abraham and the nation of Israel as a tool to speak to the whole world, the giving of the Law, Christ as Savior, the Church and the current Church Age, Christ' second coming, the Millennial (1,000 year) reign of Christ from Jerusalem, the destruction of the current heavens and earth at the end of the of the Millennial Reign, the creation of the new heavens and earth, heaven, hell and eternity. The water within the banks are represented by us as created beings with the free choices we make that involve things like; salvation, marriage, careers, everyday decisions, etc. God allows the water (humans, angels, and demons) within the banks to have a certain amount of freedom, but they cannot affect the outcome of His master plan represented as the banks of the river and its course. In this view, God maintains control over the banks of the river but allows the water within the banks to have a certain amount of freedom. However, God even uses His foreknowledge as to how the water (created beings) are going to act and takes that into account regarding His big decrees (banks of the river). This is why at different points in Scripture we see humans acting in perfect accord with God's main decrees (Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (and Esau), Moses, David, Christ (when the fullness of time had come Christ was born with perfect timing in God's plan for world history and salvation), the birth of the Church, and future events like the Anti-Christ and future prophecies.

My position leans towards infralapsarianism (current view being discussed) which affirms what I believe the Bible teaches. It is a balanced approach that grants the reality of God's absolute sovereignty in the big issues decreed and yet gives created beings a free will to choose as they please regarding smaller, individual issues like salvation (however in salvation God does grant everyone all the grace necessary and even draws all people regarding salvation so that everyone is without excuse for not receiving Him, Rom. 1:18-20, 2:1) marriage, careers personal choices, everyday choices, etc. However, even in the smaller choices of human life God will lead and guide us if asked. In addition, God even takes into account His foreknowledge of all the decisions of mankind's free will so that everything works out and harmonizes with His perfect plan for His creation so that there are no surprises to God regarding the fulfillment of His master plan for creation.

Regarding evil, I believe that evil is simply a reality that exists as a result of any being possessing a free will. The possibility of evil has always existed long before God created the

universe and created beings but He chose not to do evil, so it wasn't a living or present reality. As soon as God created beings and gave them a free will, then the possibility of evil became a greater reality and eventually Satan, along with a third of the angels and mankind, chose evil and therefore evil is now a present reality.

So, in summary, God has made decrees and has set boundaries (banks of a river) for the course of His creation, however, He has given created beings a free will and allows them to exercise this free will (water within the banks) as long as they are limited to the boundaries of the banks of the river. And within these two realities, God uses His foreknowledge to take into account the actions of His created beings and uses them in the course of His decrees. Regarding salvation, God foreknows those who will be saved (Rom. 8:28-30) and according to His foreknowledge gives them grace to receive His salvation.

Biblical Teaching

Pentateuch – The opening chapters of the Bible clearly reveal that it is God who decrees the parameters of His creation. It is God who decides to create, what to create, how to create it, the order of it as marked out by days, times, and seasons, the freedom and limits given to created beings, and the overall course and purpose for His creation. These factors are not up for discussion and are part of the main decrees of God. God grants mankind freedom to choose between good and evil as represented in the Tree of Life and holds them responsible for their actions, but does not include them in deciding about His larger decrees. God then sends the great flood and saves Noah and his family, He then confuses the languages of mankind at the Tower of Babel, He chooses Abraham and nation of Israel as the key tool from which He will reveal Himself to the rest of mankind, and gives the Law at Mt. Sinai as the means to test mankind and show them that they are sinful and need a Savior. God also establishes covenants with Abraham and the nation of Israel and states that even if mankind fails to keep their part of the agreement that God will keep His word and carry out His plan regardless. It can be seen in this section of the Bible that it is clearly God who is carrying out His big decrees and while mankind has freedom to make choices, it is God who fulfills His plans both by His will and foreknowledge of what mankind will choose. So in keeping in line with the wide river analogy, God clearly establishes where the banks of the river are, the course and flow it will take, but grants created beings movement with these boundaries in the same way water has. Pages 299-301

Historical Books – God continues to establish and add to His decrees by showing that He is sovereign and in control of the banks of the river and its course, but at the same time giving mankind movement within the banks and then holding them responsible for this movement. God establishes another decree by establishing the Davidic Covenant with David whereby making the promise that through David's lineage will come the Messiah and Savior.

Poetry and Wisdom – The book of Job shows God's sovereignty in maintaining clear control over Satan and only allowing him to do what God allowed him. God also had a plan to show all mankind a "behind the scenes" look at how the spirit world operates and how God uses trials and suffering in the lives of mankind. God gave Job a free will to wrestle

with God's working in his life and blessed him for his upright choices while He was unhappy with Job's friend's wrong choices and thinking. Psalms and Proverbs acknowledge God's sovereign will as God elected, anointed and enthroned David's kingship and lineage so as to fulfill His covenant regarding the coming of the Messiah. Nonetheless, God punished those who rebelled against His grace and refused to follow Him. Ecclesiastes 7:29, makes a clarifying statement regarding God's creation of mankind and their free will, *"See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes"* (ESV).

The Prophets – This section shows as well that God moves forward with the course and purposes predetermined for His creation and at the same time, grants mankind freedom to move within the boundaries He has determined. God holds the nation of Israel accountable for their free choices by sending both the northern and southern tribes into captivity to punish them for their sins and hold them responsible. At the same time, God raises up kings of other surround nations to carry out these captivities which confirms His sovereignty. In addition, God raises up kings and countries to help bring the nation of Israel back into their homeland after their captivity. God sovereignly protects the Davidic Covenant by keeping David's lineage intact and keeping a son of David on the throne until the Messiah comes. Isaiah 14:27, upholds God's sovereignty by stating, *"For the LORD of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back"* (ESV)? So, on one hand, we see the sovereignty of God and that nothing will thwart His purposes, but on the other hand, we see the free will of mankind being exercised and God's punishment and blessings being given in accord with the choices people make.

Primitive Christianity/Acts – In the Gospels and Acts, we see a perfect picture of both the sovereignty of God and the free will of mankind. Scripture says, *"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law"* (Gal. 4:4 ESV). Here we see that God is in full control of not only the course of world history and His creation purposes but is also in full control of the exact timing of it all as well. We see that Christ' birth, rejection, death, and resurrection were grounded in God's sovereign plan for mankind. Peter testified on the day of Pentecost, *"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man, attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know-- this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men"* (Acts 2:22, 23 ESV). Here we see the foreknowledge of God in play and how He used the wickedness of mankind to carry out His plans. While it was prophesied that Christ would die and that Judas would betray Jesus, these people were still held accountable for their free choices and called wicked. We also see in the Gospels countless references by Christ of the reality of hell and the judgments to come upon all who didn't repent. These same judgments are carried over and mentioned in Acts as well. Page 306

Pauline Corpus – In the body of the letters the Apostle Paul wrote through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we see many references to the Sovereignty of God and the free will of mankind. We see in Eph. 1:9-11, that God has a plan and works everything out according

with His purposes and will. Romans 8:28, 29, gives us a good picture into the sovereignty of God and the free will of mankind regarding salvation:

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (ESV).

Here we see that God calls people to salvation and works within them according to His foreknowledge. So, God takes into account mankind’s choices by using His foreknowledge and even uses the free choices of mankind within His sovereign decrees for creation. God’s foreknowledge regarding mankind’s free will is used by God in accordance with His divine decrees to bring about the exact fulfillment of His plans and purposes for the course His creation. Pages 306-308

John’s Writing – Contained within John’s writings are overwhelming proofs of God’s sovereignty and control over His creation. The book of Revelation clearly outlines the fulfillment of God’s master plan for His creation along with the perfect timing of its consummation. Along with this sovereignty is seen the blessings and judgments of people with a free will. God clearly holds people accountable and responsible for the choices they make with their free wills and would be unjust if He punished them for making them do what God made them do rather than what they freely chose to do.

Other New Testament Literature – Hebrews confirms the immutability and complete trustworthiness of God’s decrees with the phrase, *“The unchanging nature of His purpose”* (Heb. 6:17). James also attest that there is no variation or change within God regarding His plans (James 1:17). And Peter emphasizes the same truth in 1 Pet. 1:20 when he speaks of the plan of God that was determined before the creation of the world. Along with the sovereignty of God, however, is the free will of mankind and the judgments and blessings that will come upon mankind as a result of their free choices (2 Pet. 3:9).