

God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility



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CHAPTER 1 - Who is God; Who is Man?

[Foundational Issues]

When the Bible speaks on an issue, especially if it pertains to basic issues of reality, it will rarely (if ever?) defend what it says. Instead, it speaks from the position of being absolutely authoritative, without need of apology or defense.

This does not mean that it presents a message of pure arbitrariness. Rather, "proof" is not the issue. From the Bible's perspective, the issue is not one of man seeking truth that he does not know (hence the need for proof); rather, it is one of man suppressing what he knows to be true, and exalting himself above it as its judge.

Take, for instance, the most basic issue of "God." Down through the ages, men have tried to "prove" or "disprove" the existence of a "God," be it the God of the Bible, or some other "deity." Yet, in striking contrast, the Bible *never* attempts to do such a thing. Nor does it even consider "proof" to be an issue. For according to its message, man already has an awareness of the God of the Bible... and the issue is man's rebellion against God, not lack of "proof" that he exists.

And so, the Bible starts not with "proof," but simply with the sentence:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)

God is not a part of creation. This is perhaps the most basic distinction made in the Bible. Perhaps it could even be said that all else hinges upon this distinction! For if this statement is true, then it must influence our attitude and perspective toward not only God, but toward all of creation. To treat God and creation as though they were on the same level of reality is to distort all of one's perspective of reality.

Even so, this God - although distinct from creation - has designed creation in such a manner as to be revelatory of himself, although in a finite manner. (Nothing finite can provide a total revelation of the infinite God!). And even though creation has since become marred by the presence of sin (and its consequences), it can still be said:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. (Psalm 19:1)

Not only is this so, but man himself was created so as to be revelatory of God in a special manner.

And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:27)

In contrast with all other parts of God's creation, the being called "man" (encompassing both male and female) was made so as to bear (to carry, display, convey, communicate -

both by his very being and by his conduct) God's image. He was to be a reflection of God in all he thought, said and did, within the realm of creation.

Two items should be mentioned with regard to this "reflection" of God in creation. First, it must be remembered that it is a finite reflection of the infinite God. Nothing other than God himself can reveal God in a totally complete manner. (As used here, "finite" does not carry the connotation of being "imperfect" <that is, containing error>, but of being "limited" <not fully complete> in extent.) This "reflection" reaffirms the distinction between the Creator and the creature.

Secondly, because of sin, this "reflection" has become marred... yet it still exists. Man, in rebellion, attempts to do away with this revelation of the God who created him; he fights it and tries to suppress it, but it still remains. However, the time would come when the "second Adam" (Jesus Christ - see Romans 5:14; 1 Corinthians 15:45; and their surrounding contexts) would come and would once again be a full and accurate reflection of the Creator God. (People would hate him for it and would do to him what they would do to God, if he were to "take on" human flesh - which is exactly what he did! See John 1:1-18, etc.)

Sin has had a destructive effect on all of man's being. This includes not only his body and spirit, but also his mind. His very perceptions of reality (and the lifestyle which flows from these perceptions) have become distorted. This is illustrated in the following passage:

With the Lord's authority let me say this: Live no longer as the ungodly do, for they are hopelessly confused. Their closed minds are full of darkness; they are far away from the life of God because they have shut their minds and hardened their hearts against him. They don't care anymore about right and wrong, and they have given themselves over to immoral ways. Their lives are filled with all kinds of impurity and greed. But that isn't what you were taught when you learned about Christ. (Ephesians 4:17-20)

(Other passages describe the on-going conflict between the habits and patterns of the "former way of life" and the "new life" that is in Christ. The emphasis in this passage is on learning to live consistently with what is in the heart and mind.)

This distorted perception of reality (and of God) does not leave man with an excuse for his actions. He is still aware of the Creator... and he must constantly work to suppress that awareness. And so, we read the "indictment" against all of mankind, by the holy and righteous Judge, against whom man is in constant rebellion.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power

and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Romans 1:18-21)

The verses that follow this indictment describe man's suppression of his knowledge of God. And the basic emphasis is that man has chosen to exchange what is true for what is false. The true God is denied, and is replaced by things that are a part of creation. And although the "technique" of doing so has varied throughout history (some placed greater emphasis on rocks and animals; others place greater emphasis on technology or on self), the concluding statement is applicable to all:

They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator--who is forever praised. Amen. (Romans 1:25)

This change in perspective toward God distorted man's perspective toward all that falls into the category of "morality" and "ethics." It also resulted (simultaneously) in God's judgment of "giving them over" (verse 24, 26, and 28) to the consequences of their changed perspective. Man is now described as "depraved" in all he does. Only God's "restraining power" prevents him from fully living up to his evil "potential" (a concept mentioned various places in the Bible).

Finally, not only does man have an awareness of God that he cannot fully obliterate or remove from his consciousness, but he also has an awareness of the consequences of his actions. God has placed within man's very nature an awareness of God's laws and of the consequences of breaking them. And this awareness, though at times somewhat distorted, cannot be removed. (Remember, man bears the "image of God," whether he likes it or not.) Even man's willingness to apply God's laws to other people is a testimony against himself!

They are fully aware of God's death penalty for those who do these things, yet they go right ahead and do them anyway. And, worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too. (Romans 1:32)

Even when Gentiles, who do not have God's written law, instinctively follow what the law says, they show that in their hearts they know right from wrong. They demonstrate that God's law is written within them, for their own consciences either accuse them or tell them they are doing what is right. (Romans 2:14-15)

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. (Romans 2:1)

Two things should be mentioned regarding this judgment. One is that it takes into consideration the amount of knowledge (awareness of God's requirements) that each individual has. The person who has had minimal exposure to the will of God will *not* be judged in the same way as the person who had a lifetime of exposure... and of rejecting it.

All who have sinned apart from the law [as revealed in the Bible] will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. (Romans 2:12)

Also, all this "condemnation" - true and just though it is - must be taken within the context of the greater passage in which it is found. These things mentioned here are the foundation of the gospel (or "good news") about Christ. It is true that man is totally sinful, and therefore must be condemned by the holy and righteous God. It is true that man is totally helpless, for he cannot deliver himself out of this condition. And it is within this context that Jesus willingly chose to take upon himself what *we* deserve. In this context, Jesus Christ chose to be a substitute - to bear the penalty that we must otherwise experience. And in this choice, he displayed the greatness of the love and mercy of God!

After demonstrating that all mankind is under God's judgment (and rightfully so), the undeserved opportunity for a new relationship with God is freely offered, in which our sinfulness (and judgment) is exchanged for the righteousness of Christ (and new life in him). And it is done in such a way as to demonstrate the greatness of the love of God, while leaving his righteous justice uncompromised.

But now God has shown us a different way of being right in his sight—not by obeying the law but by the way promised in the Scriptures long ago. We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done. For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet now God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins.

For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God's anger against us. We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed his blood, sacrificing his life for us. God was being entirely fair and just when he did not punish those who sinned in former times. And he is entirely fair and just in this present time when he declares sinners to be right in his sight because they believe in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26)

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, no one is likely to die for a good person, though someone might be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. (Romans 5:6-8)

From the beginning to the end, the Bible not only claims to be authoritative, but each and every statement and command presupposes its authority. Its authority does not need to be defended; rather, it expects its authority (which exists inherently within it) to be accepted.

When it comes to the relationship of God to man, the Bible does not examine various views, give "pro's and con's" of one view compared to another, or argue so as to persuade people to choose its view. As with the issue of God's existence, it simply states as a matter of fact what "is" and what "is not."

Furthermore, the Bible claims that man has a basic comprehension of this relationship. Man is totally surrounded - within and without - with a revelation of God, and he is conscious of this revelation. Yet instead of bowing down in worship, he stubbornly suppresses this revelation, replaces it with his own folly, and questions (or denies) the very nature (or existence) of this God. He knows that this God exists ... but he doesn't want to know it.

CHAPTER 2 - The On-going Conflict Between the Bible and "Human Arguments"

[We don't see things the way God does.]

The relationship between God's actions and man's actions is spoken of throughout Scripture. God is sovereign over all; man is responsible for his actions. Men have turned these two concepts into incompatible, conflicting statements, but the Bible strongly opposes such a position. According to the Bible, both are equally true.

Moreover, the Bible considers both statements to be fully compatible with each other. Rather than saying that man is responsible for his actions "in spite of" God being sovereign (which is the way people have a tendency to view it - if they acknowledge it at all), the Bible would say that it is "because of" God's sovereignty. The sovereign God created man in such a manner that man is responsible for his actions. (God is capable of doing this!) And since God is totally sovereign, nothing (not even the Devil) can interfere, so as to remove responsibility from man.

God's sovereignty does not turn man into a robot. Man is not like a machine. Man makes choices. There are, of course, influential factors that pattern his choices. (And the Bible acknowledges this.) But those choices are not ones brought about by coercion. If God were a man (or some other created being that existed on the same "reality level" as man), such an accusation could be legitimately raised. But God is not a man.

God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are two separate (though related) issues, each having reference to its own level of reality (uncreated vs. created). They are not in conflict (as though they both pertained to the same level of reality). These two concepts are "friends," though man makes them out to be "enemies."

Remember that the Bible states that man's perception of reality has been corrupted by sin. Man is now an enemy of God, and (in keeping with his nature) wants to re-interpret all of reality. (Doing so comes "naturally"!) As previously stated, man now even denies the most basic concept of reality: the distinction and differences between the Creator and created things. He has elevated man and lowered God, until they both exist (in his thinking) on the same level of reality. Only a "change in thinking" (an aspect of repentance) can begin to change this.

The book of Romans, which so strongly emphasizes both of these concepts, also illustrates the conflict between the thinking of the man whose mind has not been "renewed" and the man who has submitted to the word of God. And it comes as no surprise that this conflict occurs at every point of the discussion.

Take, for instance, the fact that man's sin shows (by contrast) the greatness and purity of God's righteousness. Depraved man would argue that his sin is accomplishing good... and that he should, therefore, not be condemned by God. In reply, Paul shows that such an

argument ("a human argument") is a denial of everything that he has already shown to be true (in previous verses), concerning the righteousness of God's judgment. (In fact, it is a denial of God himself.) He then reaffirms that man is responsible for his own actions.

But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.)

Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?

Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" Why not say--as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say--"Let us do evil that good may result"?

Their condemnation is deserved. (Romans 3:5-8)

Another example of man's corrupted thinking is seen immediately after Paul demonstrates that God's grace (undeserved kindness) "increases" so as to be greater than whatever sin man might commit. And as before, man tries to justify his sin (instead of repenting from it). And in this case, Paul argues that God's grace is life-changing. The recipient of God's grace has been changed (by God) into a "new person."

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Such a person is still responsible for his actions. If God's grace has truly had an effect on the individual, he will live differently.

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?

By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Romans 6:1-4)

The chapters that follow this passage examine the issue of "inconsistent living" as a disciple of Christ. They explore the conflict between the "new life" and the old habit-patterns (which were developed and so firmly "established" within the individual prior to his conversion). They also describe the ultimate and complete victory over those old habit-patterns.

Chapters 9 through 11 examine the issue of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in perhaps greater detail than anywhere else in the Bible. And once again, Paul has to deal with "human arguments."

After proving that it was God's sovereign choice in choosing Jacob over Esau, Paul has to immediately respond to the false argument that God's act of choosing is an act of injustice! Yet God has a right to have mercy on those whom he wishes. As God said to Moses,

"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." (Romans 9:15b, quoting Exodus 33:19)

It seems that man is very eager to forget the differences between God and man. If God were on the same level as men, there might be a justification for such an accusation. But he is not on the same level. Just as bad, the very question (or accusation) implies a denial of man's hopeless condition. It's not as though God was taking a "good" person and forcing him to perish; rather, God is taking a hopelessly lost person and mercifully saving him from what he deserves (and would otherwise obtain). God does not have to do this. And if he chooses to not do so, as was in the case of Esau, he has done nothing wrong.

It was previously shown that when man chooses to suppress truth and to live in rebellion to God, God "gives them over" to their sinful cravings. (Romans 1:24, 26, 28) From the standpoint of God's sovereignty, man wants his sin, so God lets him have it ... and more of it. (This is an aspect of the judgment against sin.) From the standpoint of man's responsibility, sin is enslaving. The more a person chooses to practice sin, the more he becomes incapable of not doing so. It becomes a habit, a way of life. (Interestingly, for the person who has new life in Christ, it could be said that righteousness is "enslaving"! The more he practices righteous living, the more it will become his way of life, and the less he will be willing to live in his former way of life! See Romans 6.)

Another way of saying that God "gives man over" to the sins he so eagerly wants to practice would be to say that God "hardens" him. And sinful man, not wanting to be held responsible for his own choices, chooses once again to accuse God of injustice. He tries to use "sovereignty" as a justification for his sin. He refuses to listen to what God says, and responds, "I can't help it, because God is making me do it."

Well then, you might say, "Why does God blame people for not listening? Haven't they simply done what he made them do?" (Romans 9:19)

The only legitimate response is repentance. But in his stubborn rebellion, man chooses rather to talk back to God, just as he would to another man. He willingly "forgets" that he is the creature and that God is the Creator. He suppresses the fact that, from the "sovereignty" perspective, God has a right to do as he wants.

No, don't say that. Who are you, a mere human being, to criticize God? Should the thing that was created say to the one who made it, "Why have

you made me like this?" When a potter makes jars out of clay, doesn't he have a right to use the same lump of clay to make one jar for decoration and another to throw garbage into? (Romans 9:20-21)

If man wants to view things from the creature's viewpoint, he should focus not on God's sovereignty (in the sense of using it as an occasion to accuse God), but on his patience (and mercy)!

[God is] very patient with those who are the objects of his judgment.
(Romans 9:22b)

The primary emphasis of the context (in which this passage exists) deals with God's sovereign plan to display his power and glory (which he has a right to do). It deals with God's eternal purposes, rather than man's responsibility. And it shows (from the sovereignty perspective) the place of man in this "great display." (From the perspective of man's responsibility, our choices determine how we fit into all this!)

God has every right to exercise his judgment and his power, but he also has the right to be very patient with those who are the objects of his judgment and are fit only for destruction. He also has the right to pour out the riches of his glory upon those he prepared to be the objects of his mercy— even upon us, whom he selected, both from the Jews and from the Gentiles. (Romans 9:22-24)

The rest of the chapter, and the two that follow, focus on the relationship of Jews and Gentiles to this great plan. A study of those chapters (9 through 11) might prove helpful in better understanding the relationship between sovereignty and responsibility.

How should we respond to all this? In sin and rebellion (and thus to place ourselves within the category of those "prepared for destruction")? Or in repentance, obedience and praise to God (and thus placing ourselves within the category of those called "objects of his mercy")? It is fitting that we end this section as Paul does:

Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past tracing out! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"
"Or who has first given to him, and it will be repaid to him again?" For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

CHAPTER 3 - An Attempt to Analyze the Issue

[Do these things "contradict" or "complement"??]

The following statements summarize the theoretically possible claims regarding the issue of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility:

Who is/is not sovereign?	Is man responsible for his actions?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• God is sovereign.• God is not sovereign.• Man is sovereign (a denial of God's sovereignty).• Man is not sovereign.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Man is responsible for his actions.• Man is not responsible for his actions.

Of these choices, the Bible claims the following :

- God is sovereign.
- Man is not sovereign and man is responsible for his actions.

The Bible mentions these concepts side by side. They are considered to be fully compatible with each other. God is sovereign; man is responsible for his actions (and not sovereign). Yet, man has an inherent (sinful) tendency to distort them, and to turn them into conflicting statements. Note the following change from the concept of "responsible" to the concept of "free" (free from being "controlled" and all the implications thereof).

- God is sovereign.
- Man is "free" (that is, "sovereign to himself").

Now these two concepts form a genuine conflict. And ultimately one or the other must be denied. And so we end up with the following two choices (depending on which principle is denied):

- God is sovereign and man is not free (but is like a "robot").
- God is not sovereign and man is free to do as he pleases.

In the "extreme," the first view becomes "determinism" or "fatalism" and the second becomes "indeterminism" or "random chance." In the one case, man is considered not responsible for his actions, because his actions are being "helplessly" controlled by a "higher force." In the other, man can do as he pleases - he is in control, not some "higher power." (Alternately, this view can consider nothing to be in control. In either case, man is not held responsible by some "higher power.")

Having accepted this distortion, an individual's view may be placed anywhere in this "spectrum," from one extreme to the other, but he will still view these concepts as being

conflicting statements that need "reconciled." If fully consistent, he will take the position that "you can't have both." If not, he may try to have "a little bit of each," with God and man each having "limited sovereignty" - technically, a contradiction in terms!

In total contrast to this man-made "philosophical quagmire," the Bible defines the issues accurately - not turning them into conflicting concepts - and places them together the way they actually are. These concepts are "friends," not "enemies." They are "parallel concepts" (going side-by-side), rather than "intersecting concepts" (crashing against each other). [Note: This idea of "complementary truths" could be illustrated by railroad tracks. They always "go together," but we must always keep them parallel to each other, rather than trying to get them to meet at one point (that is, to intersect). Another way to look at them is like "boundaries" which keep us out of error, and in the "straight and narrow way" of truth.]

There are numerous illustrations throughout the Bible in which these concepts are placed together, with reference to the same event. One example of this occurs when Moses confronts Pharaoh, to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Several times the account says that Pharaoh hardened his heart. Yet it also says (several times) that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Two of the verses which illustrate this are as follows:

But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go. // Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh, and the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land. (Exodus 8:32 and Exodus 11:10; both of these concepts are mentioned several times, in reference to Pharaoh.)

The prophet Habakkuk was confronted with the question of how it was possible for a holy, righteous God to punish a wicked nation (Israel) by using a nation that was even more wicked (Babylon). The book of Habakkuk gives God's response. It also shows the contrast between human responsibility and God's sovereignty. First, God says that he is going to raise up the wicked nation that would destroy Israel.

I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own. (Habakkuk 1:6)

Later (in his answer to Habakkuk's question), he talks about the evil nation's responsibility for its actions, and the judgment it would experience, because of its wrong motives and sinful actions. In the pronouncement of judgment, God makes reference to the king of that nation:

See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright. (Habakkuk 2:4a)

Because you have plundered many nations, the peoples who are left will plunder you. For you have shed man's blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them. // You have plotted the ruin of many

peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life. // You will be filled with shame instead of glory. Now it is your turn! Drink and be exposed! The cup from the LORD'S right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory. (Habakkuk 2:8,10,16)

A wonderful contrast occurs in the midst of all this judgment, this death and destruction. Words of hope are given to those who trust God. They, too, would be rewarded; but it would be a reward of life. (Much of the New Testament is involved in developing the full significance of this statement.)

...but the righteous will live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4b)

Human responsibility plays a part in both cases. Each will be rewarded according to what he has done. Ultimately, all glory, honor and reverence will be given to God, to whom it belongs.

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea. // But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him. (Habakkuk 2:14,20)

Perhaps one of the most amazing passages, which shows sovereignty and responsibility together, occurs in the book of Acts. The believers are praying for strength and boldness, as persecution is beginning to increase. As they pray they make mention of what was perhaps the greatest act of evil ever to occur. And as they do so, they not only consider it to be the act of evil men, but they also acknowledge the place of God's sovereign power and will in it!

When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.' For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (Acts 4:24-30)

Perhaps I could summarize the whole issue in this manner: These two concepts (sovereignty / responsibility) belong to two different spheres of reality. To try to put them "together" within one reality sphere (and thus to turn them into conflicting concepts) is a

denial of the Creator/creature distinction. We *cannot* equate man-to-man relationships (or man's relationship to anything within the sphere of creation) with God-to-man relationships. This is a denial of God, as he has revealed himself in the Bible.

We must accept both in the manner that the Bible presents them - neither opposing nor conflicting. They are "friends," not "enemies."

We must respond to what the Bible says. And our response will "earn" us whatever part we will play in the ultimate manifestation of God's power and glory - whether we will be objects of his wrath or objects of his mercy. We can respond by accepting it, and thus being objects of his mercy, or we can reject it. From the standpoint of sovereignty, we will act in accordance with our nature, whether the old (fallen) nature, or the new nature (available through Christ). But from the standpoint of human responsibility - and that is what concerns us - we will choose, and will be held responsible for our own choices.

There is one last thing to mention. Man normally tends to take issues like this (any topic, for that matter), turn the complementary concepts into conflicting opposites, and then accept one or the other (not both). Yet even if he did supposedly accept both, this does not mean that he has accepted the view of the Bible. Mere intellectual or philosophical acceptance will not do. A person cannot truly accept the viewpoint of the Bible unless he *submits* to it. This is man's proper response to God's Word.

CHAPTER 4 - The Place of God's Mercy

[Keeping our focus "balanced."]

To leave matters here might be considered "unfair," because it would leave us with a somewhat one-sided emphasis on one of the characteristics of God... to the neglect of one of its complements.

In the previous two "chapters" we have been emphasizing God's sovereignty. If we leave it at this, we might be guilty of portraying a cruel and heartless God, totally indifferent about the plight of the people he created.

It is true that there are many things about our God that we can barely comprehend. (What is finite can *never* fully comprehend what is infinite.) But cruelty and heartlessness are *not* among these characteristics. *By no means!*

Scripture is full of verses describing the compassion, love and mercy of God. Yet because of the way sin (or the sinful nature) has affected our thinking, it may be difficult for us to comprehend how these characteristics "mesh together" with the concept of God's sovereign "decree" (which includes judgment against sin). Nevertheless, both are true, and we must consciously acknowledge (and emphasize) both, in order to get an accurate (though finite) comprehension of God.

Perhaps the best place to start would be the following verse:

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.
(2 Peter 3:9)

The context is the coming judgment and the fact that it has not yet come. It was written in response to scoffers who had begun to mock because of God's "slowness" in doing what he said he would do. But the reason for God's "delay" is *not* because it won't happen. Rather, it is because of his desire to give those people another opportunity before it is too late. It is *not* his desire for *anyone* to perish. He would like all to repent.

But we know that not all will do so. And since sin *cannot* stand in the presence of a holy and righteous God, he *must* eventually do something. He must eventually cast it out of his presence (and away from all the blessings that come from him - everything that is good). Because of his compassion, he is going to wait "as long as possible." (This is from the standpoint of time - see the previous verse which emphasizes that God is *not* limited by time, as we are). Then, true to his word, he will come, but only when there is no alternative. Prior to that event, sin will increase to the point that it would totally destroy mankind, if not stopped. And it is for the sake of those whom he has saved, that he will come.

In fact, unless that time of calamity is shortened, the entire human race will be destroyed. But it will be shortened for the sake of God's chosen ones. (Matthew 24:22)

We can say that these events will occur because God has decreed them to happen in this manner. But from the perspective of human responsibility, it will happen because *we*, as a race of fallen humanity, have chosen to so fully rebel against God that we are no longer capable of experiencing the blessings that come from him - things such as peace, joy, and life. Remember that all the true blessings of life have their origin in him. In fact, their very existence is a testimony to all people about God and what he is like!

He has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy. (Acts 14:17)

The following verses describe his love toward those who hate him... as well as the requirement that his followers must become "like him," and do the same.

"But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matthew 5:44-47)

[Note: Many who call themselves "Christians" do not do this. But we should not be surprised, for Jesus warned that prior to the final day of judgment, many "pretenders" would exist. As warned in 2 Peter 2:2, false teachers would give the way of truth a bad reputation. And Paul warns us that people would refuse to love the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:10) and that they would be characterized as "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:5). In the end, however, it will be seen that they are "bringing swift destruction on themselves" (2 Peter 2:1). They will not escape - and it will be because of their own actions. (No one will be blaming "sovereignty" for it!)]

Jesus often showed compassion for those who rejected him. The example that follows occurred just prior to his warning about the severe judgment that would have to come because of their rejection. His compassion was genuine (and was demonstrated throughout his life - read the gospels), yet so was their rejection. (You can't blame "sovereignty.") It was with great, genuine sorrow that he warned them of what they would have to experience (recorded in chapter 24 and 25).

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me. And now look, your house is left to you, empty and desolate. For I tell you this,

you will never see me again until you say, 'Bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord!' (Matthew 23:37-39)

Even when they crucified him, how did he respond?

Jesus said, "Forgive them, Father! They don't know what they are doing."
(Luke 23:34a)

If he hadn't said that, perhaps the world would have ended at that time, in an enormous fireball of well-deserved judgment!

The love, compassion, mercy and patience of God toward those who have rebelled against him is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. To emphasize "sovereignty" and to ignore this, or to use "sovereignty" to diminish the significance of this, would be to perversely distort the character of the God of the Bible.

All mankind willingly chose to sin in the Garden of Eden. We were there in Adam (though we did not have a consciousness that was separate from his). And ever since that time, people have willingly confirmed that choice - each time they choose to sin.

God would be fully righteous and just if he would simply wipe us all off the face of the earth. He could rightfully say, "I've had enough of this," and pour out his wrath against us. But our God is not like this; he is full of mercy and compassion.

Because of the LORD'S great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23)

Where is another God like you, who pardons the sins of the survivors among his people? You cannot stay angry with your people forever, because you delight in showing mercy. Once again you will have compassion on us. You will trample our sins under your feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean! (Micah 7:18-19)

These verses in Micah were originally written to the nation of Israel (God's people) when they had become so wicked that he could no longer refuse to send judgment against them. But because of what Jesus did on the cross, people in all nations have the opportunity to have a part in this compassion and forgiveness.

On the day of judgment, there will be a sad, but interesting change in perspective. Today, many accuse God of being unjust or of not giving them "what they deserve." Many blame God for what they do. ("I can't help it; God made me this way.") But at the judgment, all

will change. When we stand in the presence of God, and see how great the contrast is, between his holiness and our sinfulness, all such accusations will melt away. Those who perish will willingly acknowledge that they are receiving only what they truly deserve. It will only be the true followers of Jesus who confess that they do *not* get what they deserve. For they, too, deserve the wrath of God. But it was experienced by someone else - on the cross.

May those who are wise understand what is written here, and may they take it to heart. The LORD's ways are right, and righteous people live by following them, but sinners stumble and fall because they ignore them.
(Hosea 14:9)

CHAPTER 5 - How Can a Person Make Sure He Is Among the "Elect"?

[There is hope!]

Some people spend a lot of time worrying about whether or not they are "elect." They want to "go to heaven," but are under the impression that if they aren't "elect," nothing they do can change that. However, the Bible tells us that if we want to make sure we are among the "elect," we can!! Two passages will be given below, although this theme exists in many places. (These passages also warn us to *not* presume we are saved, if the "evidence" speaks to the contrary.)

The first passage is 2 Peter 1:3-15. We will focus on the concept of "striving" (also translated as "to make every effort" and "be all the more eager," in the translation used below). This concept is used three times (shown in italics). Study the passage carefully, for it contains many wonderful promises, as well as instructions on how to live.

His divine power has given us everything that pertains to life and godliness, through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these, he has given us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may share in the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption in the world caused by lust.

It is for this reason that you must *make every effort* to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.

If these qualities are yours, and increasingly so, they will keep you from being useless or unfruitful in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But anyone who lacks these qualities is nearsighted and blind, unable to remember being cleansed from his past sins.

Therefore, brothers, *be all the more eager* to make certain that you were called and chosen by God. For if you do these things, you will never fall away, but you will be richly welcomed into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I intend to constantly remind you of these things, even though you know them, and are well established in the truth you have received. I think it right to stir up your thinking by reminding you of them, as long as I am alive in this "tent" of a body. I know that I will soon be putting aside this "tent," even as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me, and I will *strive* to

make sure that, even after I am gone, you will always be able to remember these things. (2 Peter 1:3-15)

Notice that the concept of "election" (or being "chosen" by God) is connected with the second use of the word "strive" ("to be eager" in the above translation). We are told to "strive" to make sure that we are, indeed, "called" or "elect." And how do we do it? Look at the first use of the word. Peter tells us there!

Remember that this passage is written from the perspective of "human responsibility." This is what *you* are to do. And if you do your part, the "election" aspect (part of God's perspective) will also be present. If you *don't* strive to do these things, such will *not* be the case. [True, there may be some temporary "benefits" experienced by the one who does not have such qualities. He may even experience - at least from the human perspective - some type of "cleansing" from his past sins. But this is not a cleansing of the heart; it is only "external." And like the pig mentioned at the end of chapter 2, he sooner or later goes back to his old ways.]

It was so important to Peter, that we would be able to know for certain that we are saved, that he said he would "strive" (or "make every effort") to do everything possible so that we (the readers) would *never* be able to forget it!

A second passage is in the sixth chapter of Hebrews:

As for those who were once enlightened, who tasted of the heavenly gift, who shared in the Holy Spirit, and who tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come – if they have been exposed to all this and then have rejected it, it is impossible to bring them back to repentance. It is like nailing the Son of God back onto the cross and re-exposing him to public humiliation.

When land drinks in the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whom it was tilled, it receives a blessing from God. But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless. It is in danger of being cursed, and in the end it will be burned.

Dear friends, even though we speak like this, we are convinced of better things in your case - things that accompany salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown for him, in the way you have helped his people -- and continue to do so. We greatly desire each of you to have this same *diligence* to the very end, so that the hope you look forward to will be fully realized. We don't want you to be lazy, but to follow the example of those who, through faith and patience, inherited what was promised. (Hebrews 6:4-12)

The author first makes reference to people who had at least some experience of the truth, and then decided to reject it (and cannot, therefore, be brought back to repentance). But then he goes on to talk about individuals of whom he is "sure of better things." And what are those "better things"? *Things that accompany salvation!* And he encourages his readers to continue - to be "diligent" - in such things. (This is the same concept as is mentioned in 2 Peter - also translated "to strive," "to be eager" or "to make every effort"! And it is contrasted to an attitude of laziness. The two are conflicting opposites!

The people in the first group were not really saved. Their "Christianity" - or "pseudo-salvation" - may have had an effect on them for a while, but it did *not* have an effect on their hearts. The things that accompany salvation were *not* present. This passage warns us that non-Christians can look like Christians for a while (though they are not). In the end, however, the difference becomes obvious.

For the genuine Christian, the first group mentioned presents a sobering warning. He will take it to heart: he will *not* be lazy about his godliness. (See also Hebrews 10:35-39.) Unlike the people described in the first category, the genuine Christian will continue to "persevere." Even if he "backslides," it will be only temporary, for if he is genuinely saved, his "lifestyle" is to do things that accompany salvation. He cannot go against his lifestyle forever, and inevitably he will return.

One may ask the question: "How do I know that I am *not* in the first group - among those who cannot be brought back to repentance?" The choice is yours. Those who have totally rejected the Word of Truth will not accept the things spoken by it! If you have any concern, then do the things mentioned in 2 Peter. And if you do those things, you can be assured that you do *not* belong to the first group!

You do not have to "worry" about the "election" aspect of things. God will take care of that. If you take care of *your* responsibility (and give God the credit he deserves, for any good that occurs within your life), the "election" aspect will coincide. It will become a source of comfort, rather than of fear. But as stated before, the choice is yours.

Further comments about the passage in 2 Peter

This passage reminds us that these qualities must exist in us *increasingly*, in order to have assurance of salvation.

This means:

1. We are not "sinlessly perfect." There is still imperfection in us - or we wouldn't have to "increase" in godliness. This can be a comfort to those who see their imperfections (as we *all* should).
2. We need to avoid laziness in our salvation. If there is *no* increase in our holiness, year after year, we have good reason to wonder if we ever really turned to God in

the first place! This should be a warning to those who love their sins more than they love God.

Let us look to God for strength to do what we ought! It is in him that we can do these things.

If you fail in some area of life, do not give-up. Rather, start again (relying on God's strength). The devil may have won a small battle in the war against your soul, but he *hasn't won the war!* If you give-up, the devil will have the victory. But every time you start again, the victory slips out of his hands.

A willingness to keep on starting again is a good indication that God is working in your heart. So rejoice in him! Look forward to the day that you stand in his presence; for at that time, perfection will be completed in you!

Dennis Hinks © 1993, 1996 (further comments about 2 Peter); 2004
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