

God's Sovereignty and Prayer, in the Difficult Times of Life

God's sovereignty and human responsibility go together

The world has taught us a distorted view

The society we live in teaches us that *either* God is sovereign *or* people are responsible for their actions, *but not both*. Because of this, many people have difficulty in accepting what the Bible constantly affirms - namely, that God is sovereign over everything, *and* people are responsible for their actions - *both at the same time*. The Bible treats these as two different (though related) issues that coexist without conflict. But since the false views promoted by society tend to influence our thinking, we need to constantly go back to the Bible, in order to understand how to interpret them.

Two ways that God interacts with us

God interacts with us on two levels. As Creator, he is sovereign over his creation. He knows and understands all things. He directs all things in a way that, in the end, will bring honor and glory to his name, and good for all who love and follow him. From this perspective, he already knows what we pray before we say it - in fact, he knows what is on our hearts and understands our burdens, *even when we don't*.

On the other hand, God interacts with us on *our* level, revealing his glory in creation, teaching us his will in the Bible, and providing us salvation in Jesus Christ. This is the realm where human responsibility exists - and in this realm, we worship, pray and express our concerns and desires to God. God delights in our prayers, and has even chosen to use our prayer as the means by which he accomplishes his will!

Responding to these truths

In Scripture, people who understood these things *rejoiced* in God's sovereignty in life; and it influenced the way they prayed - especially when everything seemed to be going wrong. It should be our goal to be like them: to learn to pray - and even to *think* - the same way they did in these matters. Their prayers were "powerful" (James 5:16b), and we have the opportunity to learn from their examples.

There are many values in having an awareness of God's sovereignty. For instance, when we pray, we don't have to be excessively wordy, trying to get God's attention (Matthew 6:7-8). Our Father knows our needs before we ask him! Also, since he understands us fully, he is the most qualified to help us when we are in need.

Below, we are going to focus on the value of knowing that God is sovereign during the "rough" times of life. This may help us to know how to respond, when things don't go the way we would like them to go.

Trusting the Sovereign God, when things go bad.

Here, we are going to look at two examples: the apostles (during persecution) and Jesus (when he had been rejected by most of the people).

Acts 4:23-31 - Trusting God during times of persecution

This passage contains a prayer, in which God's sovereignty and human responsibility are *interwoven*. The apostles didn't shy away from sovereignty. Rather, they clung to it as the *foundation* on which they would make prayer requests - and on this foundation, they would pray about things related to *their* responsibility! They didn't ask God to *change* what he had sovereignly brought to pass. Instead, they asked God to *give them strength* to do his will, in fulfilling their responsibility in the world.

In this chapter, we read that the apostles were experiencing persecution - imprisonment and threats - for speaking the truth about Jesus (4:1-22). When they were released, their first response was to pray as a group, the same response we should have (4:23-31). Did they pray, "Stop this persecution"? No! Instead, they appealed to God's sovereignty in the *past*, and applied it to their own situation at the *present*.

First, they acknowledged God's sovereign work in the past, referring to its presence, both in creation, and in what happened to Jesus (coupled with the human responsibility aspect). They prayed something like this:

"You are the Lord over all things, the Creator (v. 24). Psalm 2:1-2 foretold what would happen to Jesus (v. 25-26). Indeed, this is the very thing that happened. The leaders and the people conspired against Jesus (= human responsibility, v. 27), and they did the very thing that you had willed to happen (= sovereignty, v. 28)."

Second, they applied this fact to their own situation. They knew that persecution was often a part of following Jesus. So rather than demanding that God change what he was doing (and make the trials go away), they prayed for boldness to respond properly. They followed Jesus' example (Luke 22:42), choosing to pursue God's will through their obedience, rather than trying to get God to change his will.

"These same people are now coming against us; so give us the boldness to speak the truth (v. 29). Show your power through us (v. 30)!"

The results? God did just what they asked him to do (v. 31); and they lived in a way that demonstrated the love of God in their lives (v. 32+).

Matthew 11:25-26 - Praising God in times of failure

Jesus traveled throughout the area of Galilee, preaching and teaching, and performing many miracles. Yet much of his effort could be summarized by the word "failure." Most people rejected his message and did not repent (11:20-24). What was Jesus' response to this? He rejoiced, because it was the Father's will for it to be that way (11:25-26)!

From the human responsibility perspective, the people did not repent, because they considered themselves too wise and intelligent to take Jesus' words seriously. They thought themselves too important to become like children, and were thus *unwilling* to humble themselves and come to Jesus.

From the sovereignty perspective, the Father was not revealed to these people (11:27). Yet we must not lose sight of the fact that this sovereignty perspective was directly connected to their *willful* unrepentant response to the good news. Those who *did* humble themselves would find rest for their souls, just as Jesus promised (11:28-30).

Differences between God's "sovereign" will and his "moral" will

Some people ask, "If God is sovereign, why should I pray?" The answer is easy. We should pray simply because God tells us to pray! It's part of his moral will for us. According to God, sovereignty and responsibility *do not* go against each other! In the Acts passage we looked at, the apostles demonstrated that fact.

- God's *sovereign* will is secret - we do not feel any compulsion to do it, and can see it only as it is addressed in prophecy or worked out in *history*. However, God's *moral* will has been revealed to us in Scripture, and we are responsible for obeying it. God's *sovereign* will is not addressed to us (as something we need to do or obey), but his *moral* will is.
- God's sovereign will includes not only the final outcome (the *ends*), but also the way we get to that final outcome (the *means*). One of the means that God uses to accomplish his purposes is *prayer*. And since God's moral will instructs us to pray, we will be held accountable for doing so.

There is much practical value in knowing about God's sovereignty and responding rightly to it. For instance, there are many things we *don't* have to pray about - or at least we can pray differently about them (in a way that is of much greater value). As the apostles demonstrated, we can ask God for strength to change the things *we* are doing (things related to his *moral* will), rather than demanding that he change what *he* is doing (things related to his *sovereign* will). We can focus on becoming more "Christ-like" in our values and conduct.

The joy of knowing that the Father understands the difficult times in our lives

We who are followers of Jesus have become members of the family of God (through adoption - Romans 8:15). This is because the Son, Jesus, has made the Father known to us (Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22). As we get to know the Father, through the Scriptures and prayer, we learn that he understands all our needs (Matthew 6:8), and that we can *trust* him.

Life is unpredictable; and when things don't go the way we had hoped, it is sufficient to realize that "Father knows." We often *don't* have answers for things that happen; but we *do* have the Father. And we can follow our brother Jesus' example, and commit everything in life to the Father. As Jesus said, "not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). We can rest assured that our Father will not allow things to get worse than we can endure (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Knowing this provides us with a hope that we can hold on to, a future we can look forward to. It can be a source of confidence during the difficult times of life, during unjust suffering, or even when we are facing death.

The issue of suffering often results in questions and misunderstandings, especially when it seems senseless and unjust. The Jews in Jesus' day thought that suffering was always the consequence of one's sins, even when no obvious sin could be found. This can be observed in passages such as: Luke 13:2, 4 (tragic deaths); John 9:1-2, 34 (the man born blind); and Isaiah 53:4b (the way they interpreted Jesus' death on the cross).

Jesus, in contrast, taught the disciples a different way to interpret suffering. Sometimes it *might* be due to our sins; but much of the suffering we experience exists simply because of sin's general effect on the world itself - not because of any specific person's sin. And rather than being "meaningless," God can use it to accomplish something good in our lives.

There are many ways that God can accomplish good through suffering. For instance, suffering can be for the glory of God or for a demonstration of his power (John 9:3; 2 Corinthians 12:9). It can even serve as a warning

to those who refuse to repent (Luke 13:3, 5). But whether or not we see immediate value in suffering, we can rest on the fact that God has promised to use *all* things to accomplish good in the lives of those who love him (Romans 8:28).

When we accept the *fact* stated in Romans 8:28, we can even accept Job's comment that the *trouble* we experience is from God (Job 2:10) - though we may prefer to describe it as being *indirectly* from God. In Job's case, Satan caused the trials; but God permitted him to do so. Job didn't know the verse we call "Romans 8:28," because it hadn't yet been written; but he *lived* it!

Romans 8:15-39 - The Holy Spirit prays for us in such times; God uses those times to accomplish good in our lives

This is a wonderful passage of hope, a source of encouragement during the difficult times of life. There are many times we *don't* know how to pray, and we can be encouraged to know that, "behind the scenes," the Holy Spirit is praying for us! This passage explains not only *why* we need the Spirit's help in praying, but also *the final outcome* of that prayer. Here is a summary of that passage:

We live in a world that has been fractured by the consequences of sin (see Genesis 3). It affects not only us, but everything around us - all of creation (v. 20). Even though God has adopted us as sons (v. 15), the adoption process will not be complete until Jesus returns and makes all things new (vs. 17-18, 21, 23a). All creation waits for this event (v. 19).

In the meantime, we experience difficulties, trials, suffering and pain (v. 23b). The Holy Spirit (who is in us, because of our adoption as God's sons) helps us in two ways:

First, he enables us to endure our troubles, reminding us that we are God's children (vs. 16-17), and encouraging us to focus on our future hope (vs. 24-25).

Second, he takes our weak (and sometimes misguided) prayers and "translates" them into strength, something fully compatible with God's will (v. 26). And God, the one who adopted us (v. 15), and who knows what the Spirit prays (v. 27), will use *all* things (even physical evil and the trials of life that make no sense to us) to accomplish good in our lives (v. 28-30). Nothing can stop him from doing so (v. 31-39)!

If we understand the relationship of God to our prayers, especially as it relates to the difficult times of life, we will be able to respond the same way that the apostle Paul did, at the end of this passage:

... in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:37-39)