

God's Absolute Sovereignty

No doctrine is more despised by the natural mind than the truth that God is absolutely sovereign. Human pride loathes the suggestion that God orders everything, controls everything, rules over everything. The carnal mind, burning with enmity against God, abhors the biblical teaching that nothing comes to pass except according to His eternal decrees. Most of all, the flesh hates the notion that salvation is entirely God's work. If God chose who would be saved, and if His choice was settled before the foundation of the world, then believers deserve no credit for their salvation.

But that is, after all, precisely what Scripture teaches. Even faith is God's gracious gift to His elect. Jesus said, "No one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father" (John 6:65). "Nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Matt. 11:27). Therefore no one who is saved has anything to boast about (cf Eph. 2:8, 9). "Salvation is from the Lord" (Jonah 2:9).

The doctrine of divine election is explicitly taught throughout Scripture. For example, in the New Testament epistles alone, we learn that all believers are "chosen of God" (Titus 1:1). We were "predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11, emphasis added). "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world ... He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will" (vv. 4, 5). We "are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son ... and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (Rom. 8:28-30).

When Peter wrote that we are "chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Peter 1:1, 2), he was not using the word "foreknowledge" to mean that God was aware beforehand who would believe and therefore chose them because of their foreseen faith. Rather, Peter meant that God determined before time began to know and love and save them; and He chose them without regard to anything good or bad they might do. We'll return to this point again, but for now, note that those verses explicitly state that God's sovereign choice is made "according to the kind intention of His will" and "according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will"—that is, not for any reason external to Himself. Certainly He did not choose certain sinners to be saved because of something praiseworthy in them, or because He foresaw that they would choose Him. He chose them solely because it pleased Him to do so. God declares "the end from the beginning ... saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'" (Isa. 46:10). He is not subject to others' decisions. His purposes for choosing some and rejecting others are hidden in the secret counsels of His own will.

Moreover, everything that exists in the universe exists because God allowed it, decreed it, and called it into existence. "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (Ps. 115:3). "Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps" (Ps. 135:6). He "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). "From Him and through Him and to Him are all things" (Rom. 11:36). "For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him" (1 Cor. 8:6).

What about sin? God is not the author of sin, but He certainly allowed it; it is integral to His eternal decree. God has a purpose for allowing it. He cannot be blamed for evil or tainted by its existence (1 Sam. 2:2: "There is no one holy like the Lord"). But He certainly wasn't caught off-guard or standing helpless to stop it when sin entered the universe. We do not know His purposes for allowing sin. If nothing else, He permitted it in order to destroy evil forever. And God sometimes uses evil to accomplish good (Gen. 45:7, 8; 50:20; Rom. 8:28). How can these things be? Scripture does not answer all the questions for us. But we know from His Word that God is utterly sovereign, He is perfectly holy, and He is absolutely just.

Admittedly, those truths are hard for the human mind to embrace, but Scripture is unequivocal. God controls all things, right down to choosing who will be saved. Paul states the doctrine in inescapable terms in the ninth chapter of Romans, by showing

that God chose Jacob and rejected his twin brother Esau “though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God’s purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls” (v. 11). A few verses later, Paul adds this: “He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (vv. 15, 16).

Paul anticipated the argument against divine sovereignty: “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’” (v. 19). In other words, doesn’t God’s sovereignty cancel out human responsibility? But rather than offering a philosophical answer or a deep metaphysical argument, Paul simply reprimanded the skeptic: “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?” (vv. 20, 21).

Scripture affirms both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. We must accept both sides of the truth, though we may not understand how they correspond to one another. People are responsible for what they do with the gospel—or with whatever light they have (Rom. 2:19, 20), so that punishment is just if they reject the light. And those who reject do so voluntarily. Jesus lamented, “You are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life” (John 5:40). He told unbelievers, “Unless you believe that I am [God], you shall die in your sins” (John 8:24). In John chapter 6, our Lord combined both divine sovereignty and human responsibility when He said, “All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (v. 37); “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life” (v. 40); “No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (v. 44); “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life” (v. 47); and, “No one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father” (v. 65). How both of those two realities can be true simultaneously cannot be understood by the human mind—only by God.

Above all, we must not conclude that God is unjust because He chooses to bestow grace on some but not to everyone. God is never to be measured by what seems fair to human judgment. Are we so foolish as to assume that we who are fallen, sinful creatures have a higher standard of what is right than an unfallen and infinitely, eternally holy God? What kind of pride is that? In Psalm 50:21 God says, “You thought that I was just like you.” But God is not like us, nor can He be held to human standards. “‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isa. 55:8, 9).

We step out of bounds when we conclude that anything God does isn’t fair. In Romans 11:33 the apostle writes, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?” (Rom. 11:33, 34).

By John MacArthur. Resource can be found at www.gty.org