

Predestination vs Freewill

Pt 2: What is Divine Sovereignty?

God is Sovereign and no true believer would disagree: in fact we are unanimous, I believe, in our sincere desire to defend and uphold this most crucial doctrine!

Where disagreement arises among believers concerns the manner in which (and the extent to which) God exercises His Sovereignty. A clear understanding of just what constitutes God's Sovereignty is therefore *crucial* if we want to understand the various issues that are raised in a topic such as Pre-destination.

So, let's begin with what we all do (hopefully) agree on:

Absolute Sovereignty can be defined as having supreme authority, control, and power. For example, a king is truly a *sovereign* when he has complete (often unchallenged) rule over a country. Similarly, God is 'sovereign' over the universe. This means that, as such:

(i) He has the right, the authority, and the power to govern, determine and control all that has happened, is happening, and will happen in the present, the future and at all times.

(ii) He has the right and authority to achieve His purposes and has the power to bring about circumstances that cause whatever He 'wills' to come to pass.

(iii) He has complete control of everything and there is nothing that is done (or is *not* done) without His will or by His permission.

This is true sovereignty - and it's made possible because of God's essential nature and attributes.

Aspects of a Sovereign God:

(i) He is the Almighty Creator ([Genesis 1:1](#); [Psalm.8:3](#); [John 1:3](#); [Colossians 1:16](#); [Hebrews 1:3](#)), all-powerful (*omnipotent*), all-knowing (*omniscient*) and possessing infinite wisdom ([Psalm 147:4-5](#); [Matthew 19:26](#); [Luke 12:6-7](#); [Romans 16:27](#)).

All of this means, of course, that God has the power and the prerogative to do whatever He wishes! Nobody (human or angelic) can dictate to Him in any way whatsoever:

Psalm 115:3 "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him."

Nobody (and nothing) has the power to resist God or thwart His purposes:

2 Chronicles 20:6 "Lord, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you."

Given all of this, issues arise which seemingly contradict our understanding of supreme authority. How is it that evil has so much sway in the earth? Why is there so much suffering? How is it that billions go to hell when God loved mankind to the point of sacrificing His only Son because, as the Word affirms, He is "not willing that any should perish"? (**2 Peter 3:9**). How does all this conform to the reality of God's supreme sovereignty?

To begin with, there is one crucial premise that *must* preface (and underlie) our discussion. It's this: that we, as mere human beings, have neither the right, the understanding or the ability to dictate to God the way in which He is to exercise His

Sovereignty!! God is not a human sovereign and we must not impose our concept of human sovereignty on a divine, eternal, omniscient and omnipotent Being who "**works out everything in conformity to the purpose of His will**" (**Ephesians 1:11**).

Man has always committed this serious error. Epicurus (341-270 BC) was an ancient Greek philosopher who founded a school of philosophy now called Epicureanism. Commenting on the existence of evil and suffering in the world, he made the following pronouncement - known as ***the riddle of Epicurus, the Epicurean trilemma or the Epicurean paradox***:

If God is willing to prevent evil but is not able - then He is not all-powerful

If He is able but not willing then He is not all-good

If He is both able and willing, then why does evil exist?

If He is neither able nor willing, then why call Him God?

All this because man persists in applying human understanding to the ways of a Divine

Being who is so far above us as to defy our attempts to reduce His thoughts and actions to the level of human logic ([Isaiah 54:8](#)). God is not a mere man that He should conform to what we would naturally expect of a human sovereign.

Let's consider *human* sovereignty for a moment:

A human sovereign, lacking infinite wisdom, knowledge and power, is essentially on the same level as his subjects. He is therefore, in certain circumstances, obliged to micro-manage them if he wishes to remain supreme! He must quash rebellion, silence opposition - even (in some cases) going to the lengths of attempting to control the thoughts and attitudes of his subjects (hence the *thought police*). This being so, the *maintenance* of human sovereignty often necessitates a descent into the horrors of dictatorship. Indeed, the nightmarish scenario of Orwell's 1984 has been tragically realised in Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, Idi Amin's Uganda and so forth!

But God is not a human sovereign! And none of us would dream of describing such terrible

destruction of freedom, initiative and personal integrity as anything but diabolical!! He is not a mere human being and so does not have to take human measures (such as direct micro-management) to accomplish His ends!! Unlike a human sovereign, He already has absolute, eternal power and - precisely because of this - can give full reign to the freedom that His Love demands, while still accomplishing all that He desires (See message no.4: *How does God control history?*”).

So how then does God exercise His Sovereignty? In just the way He wishes! And the Bible is very, very clear on just what this way is! A human sovereign cannot give his subjects free rein to make their own decisions - not, that is, if he wishes to remain sovereign! But God has sovereignly decreed that man be given a free will because He is no slave-owner: He will not force Himself on any of His creatures and *cannot* do so because of His very nature (see next message - *"Love, Righteousness and Free will"*).

But this immediately begs the question:

"If God is Sovereign, and His Will is always and invariably done, how does this square with the quite undeniable fact that free will is abused, people defy God and what God wants is so often thwarted?" Because an honest, exegetical reading of Scripture strongly suggests that this is exactly the case! This is such a crucial point that I'd like to present in full some key verses! The following verses are not, I believe, open to interpretation: they are clear, unambiguous statements of Scripture! (*all italics mine*)

To begin with, God does *not* want even one sinner to be lost:

Ezekiel 18:23 "Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. *Rather, am I not pleased* when they turn from their ways and live?"

2 Peter 3:9 "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, *not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*"

1 Timothy 2:3-4 "This is good, and *pleases* God our Savior, *who wants all people to be*

saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

The same thought is expressed in [Micah 7:18](#) where, in addressing God, the prophet says the following:

"Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy."

This is all in perfect accord with that beloved verse, so precious to each one of us:

[John 3:16](#) "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

But not everyone believes! In fact, billions perish in unbelief - rejecting Christ and refusing the way of salvation! The following passages seem to be conclusive in presenting the truth that God permits the responsibility for determining individual destiny to lie squarely on the shoulders of the individual!

We've already read in [John 3:16](#) that it's "**whosoever will may come**" - and now look at [Deuteronomy 30:19](#).

"This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live!"

Notice here that it was precisely because the Israelites were given a clear, unequivocal choice, that Heaven and earth were witnesses against them!

And in the matter of what their spiritual allegiance was to be, God said to Israel, through the prophet Elijah ([1 Kings 18:21](#)):

"How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.' But the people said nothing."

And in [Joshua 24:15](#), Joshua said to the people:

"But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve."

Again - speaking to the Pharisees - Jesus said this in [John 5:39-40](#):

"You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify

about me, [40] *yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*" (italics mine).

Notice that in every case (national, sectarian and personal), the alternatives are unambiguously presented, an appeal to the reason is made, and the individual is held responsible for the subsequent decision!

Again, in [Ezekiel 33:11](#), God is quite clearly appealing to the Israelites' reasoning faculties and the power of free choice in determining their destinies:

"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die die, people of Israel?"

And the Scriptures continue:

[Isaiah 55:7](#) "Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon."

[Psalm 81:12-13](#) "So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices. "If my people would only listen to me, if Israel would only follow my ways.."

So how is this to be explained in the light of God's Sovereignty? Does it bring His Sovereignty into question? Does the fact that God responds to faith in the individual mean that He is submitting His will to another and is thereby 'worshipping' a lesser being?

Of course not! Not in any way whatsoever! For the simple reason that that it is God's Will that man be given a free choice! It were not God's decree that this be so, then Salvation could not - and would not - be dependent on faith! Man chooses to have faith but he can only choose because God is sovereign!

I came across a very simple illustration of this just the other day:

If a man were to put an ant in a bowl, the "sovereignty" of the man over the ant would not be in doubt.

The ant may try to crawl out, and the man may - or may not - want this to happen. But the man is not *forced* to crush the ant, drown it, or pick it up. The man, for reasons of his own, may choose to let the ant crawl away! But even in doing so, the man is still in control! Because there's all the difference in the world between the man *allowing* the ant

to leave the bowl and *helplessly watching* as it escapes.

So important is faith that it is the determining factor in our eternal destiny! The unsaved sinner ultimately goes hell because of his sin - but the reason his sins send him to hell is because he has rejected the Saviour (Hebrews 11:6; 1John 5:10-12)

John 16:8-9 "When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: [9] *about sin, because people do not believe in me;*" (italics mine).

Deuteronomy 30:19 "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. *Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.*"

And the pagan world is judged, according to **Romans 1:20**, on their response to God in nature:

"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities---his eternal power and divine nature---have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so

that people are without excuse." (*italics mine*)

But we must remember that although it's God's Will (His sovereign Will) that man be given a free will, this does not mean that He has willed the sin and rebellion that has come as an inevitable result of man's abuse of that gift. In fact, what God has willed (His *sovereign* Will) and what God would want (His *desiderative* Will) are two separate things! Abuse of free will has led to God being so often genuinely frustrated with man's decisions and actions!

In **Isaiah chapter 5**, Yahweh likens Israel to a vineyard that He Himself was cultivating! Unfortunately, Israel was rebellious and unfruitful:

"Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit." (Isaiah 5:2,4).

But the immediate fulfilment of God's purposes concerning Israel was made contingent on their obedience. And this was so because God had willed it to be so!

Verse 4 is even more telling:

"What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I

looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?"

God had done everything He possibly could to encourage, cultivate and make fruitful His vineyard! Clearly the utmost He could do was not enough! Why not? There can only be one answer: Yahweh must have determined that their blessing and fruitfulness was to be dependent on their obedience!

This is but *one* example! God's genuinely heart-felt and fervent desires are seen to be thwarted again and again by man's wilful rejection!

Listen to the love and anguish in the Saviour's tone when pleading with Jerusalem:

Matthew 23:37 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, *how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing*” *(italics mine)*).

So something else was at work - something that clearly prevented the Lord from doing what He wanted to do! There is simply no getting around this clearly-stated reality! Man

is apparently perfectly capable of rejecting and thwarting God's plans for him!

This is made clear in [Luke 7:30](#)

"But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John."

So God doesn't micro-manage! In harmony with His nature and purposes (next message) He has sovereignly decreed that His creation have freedom - a self-determining free will. This attribute is perhaps the highest moral quality we can possess! There is no-one on this planet who would argue that freedom, per se, is not a good thing! It's an attribute of God Himself and one of His greatest natural gifts to mankind. Unlike the animals, we were not created to function in robotic compliance with mere instinct. Instead, we were granted self-awareness, the power of logical thought, an appreciation of ourselves and others, a memory of the past, a critical appreciation of the present and the ability to speculate, hypothesise and predict possibilities for the future!

So is sin, rebellion and evil something that God sovereignly willed or decreed? In one sense, yes, because He Himself decreed and brought into being the conditions that made these things possible! God does *not* determine that evil takes place because He hates sin; He does not determine or desire that certain individuals go to hell because in His love He would far rather that they turn from their sin and live. But it was - and is - God's sovereign Will that freedom of choice be given to the individual - even though abuse of that freedom has brought such unfortunate consequences in its wake.

Free will is inevitable, as we shall see in our next message. And there we'll also more fully understand the import of that well-known statement made by C.S Lewis:

"God's greatest act of Sovereignty was in making creatures who could say no to Him!"