

## If God is Sovereign, Why do Anything?

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God's sovereignty, as I am convinced the Bible teaches it, means that God has fore-ordained everything that happens. Before creation, God planned and decided ("ordained") the entire course of human history down to the smallest details. All circumstances in time are therefore the outworking of God's plan which He decreed in eternity.

In light of this, a common objection is "If God has already decided what will happen, then why should I do anything? We don't control history anyway. Therefore, we can just sit back and *do nothing*." The objector is saying that the logical outcome of belief in the absolute sovereignty of God is what we will call "indifferent fatalism"--the view that we should do nothing since God controls everything.

How are we to answer the objection of the indifferent fatalist? Why doesn't belief in God's absolute sovereignty lead to indifferent fatalism? And if God is absolutely sovereign, how can our choices have real meaning? These are very good questions that a proper understanding of God's sovereignty will answer.

First we need to understand the difference between *fatalism* and what is called *compatibilism*. Compatibilism is the view that God is absolutely sovereign (as explained above) and yet our choices have real meaning and we are responsible for them. It is what I believe the Bible teaches, and is often called "Calvinism." Fatalism, on the other hand, teaches that no matter what you choose or do, things will turn out the same. For example, if it is determined that Bill will get an "F" on his test tomorrow, then no matter how hard he studies or how well he knows the material, he will fail. His choices do not really affect what will happen.<sup>1</sup>

Compatibilism, in contrast to fatalism, says that our choices really do affect the future, and that if different choices had been made, the future would have been different. On this view, if Bill doesn't study, he will fail. But if he does study hard, then his studying will be the means that brings about a good grade. In regards to God's sovereignty, this means that God does not just ordain the ends (for example, a good grade for Bill) and then say "this will happen no matter what."

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<sup>1</sup> See Lowell Kleiman and Stephen Lewis, *Philosophy: An Introduction Through Literature*, (Paragon House: New York, 1992), p 554.

No, God also ordains the *means* to His planned end (for example, God ordains that Bill will study as the means to the good grade that He decreed). Our decisions are each links in the chain of means ordained by God to bring about His planned ends. If different decisions had been made, the consequences would have been different. But God works to ensure that the means He has ordained will most certainly occur so that none of His purposes can fail. This makes human decisions truly significant and vital.

It should now be more clear why the absolute sovereignty of God does not amount to fatalistic indifference. In short, Bill should study because that is the means that God uses to bring about his good grades. If Bill does get good grades, then his studying was just as predestined by God's plan as were the good grades. All good choices that anyone makes are ultimately caused by God; all evil choices are willingly permitted by God as a part of His plan. Furthermore, God brings about His decrees in a way that preserves our responsibility and does not violate our will (this will be explained more later).

The second reason to reject fatalistic indifference is that it is self-contradictory. The person who is fatalistically indifferent would be saying "Because God decides everything that will happen, I will stop making choices." But the choice to stop making choices is itself a choice!

God made us in a way that we are decision-making beings. We will always make one choice or another in any given situation--we cannot help but to make choices when confronted with alternatives (we have no choice in the matter!). For example, when confronted with the option to eat either a piece of pie or a piece of cake, it is impossible for me to not make some sort of choice. I will either have the pie, the cake, or neither. *If I refuse to make a choice, I am still making a choice--the choice not to eat.* Indifferent fatalism is false because it is impossible--it self-destructs in a self-contradiction. Impossibilities are entirely unapplicable, for trying to apply fatalistic indifference is to deny it. For this reason it cannot be the logical application of belief in God's absolute sovereignty.

Clearly, God's sovereignty does not remove the need for and reality of our choices. But what if a person "modifies" their position of fatalistic indifference and tries to use God's sovereignty as an excuse to remain in sin?

One could take God's sovereignty and (mis)apply it this way. That would be sin. But just because a teaching can be misapplied does not make it false. Shall we also conclude that the truths of eternal security and justification by faith alone are false because some people try to use them as an excuse for sin? (See Romans 6:1-2 for how Paul would respond to such a misapplication of these truths.) A person could decide to not seek God or not obey Him because "everything is up to Him anyway." But does that make indifference and passivity the logical outcome of believing in God's sovereignty? Couldn't belief in God's sovereignty be taken just as easily in the other direction and be properly applied to

encourage *zealous obedience* instead of *indifferent fatalism*? Since we *must* make a choice either to live righteously or live sinfully, on what basis can one say that God's sovereignty leads logically to a choice of human laziness/sinfulness instead of a choice for human godliness? Paul says something applicable here: "And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say), `Let us do evil that good may come'? Their condemnation is just" (Romans 3:8).

Instead of saying "God is sovereign, therefore I will not bother to seek Him and do righteousness" one could with equal logical consistency say "God is sovereign, therefore I will zealously obey Him at all times because I know He will most certainly bless my obedience with great fruit. And I know that He will victoriously uphold me with His strength and perseverance since He is not only in control but also a holy, merciful God who loves righteousness." One path or the other *will* be chosen. We cannot *not* choose.

But how are choices made? Answering this question will take us to the real issue at stake. As humans, we make choices according to our greatest desire of the moment--we choose what we think is the best option at the time. This means that our choices reveal our character, since it is our character which produces our desires and therefore determines what we will consider the best option. A good character will generally desire good things, and a bad character will desire bad things. What we choose therefore reveals the condition of our heart.

Therefore, if we use God's sovereignty as an excuse for sin, it reveals the wickedness in our heart. If we correctly apply this doctrine, however, and see the freedom it gives us to diligently obey, it reveals the goodness that God is working in our hearts. If we try and use God's sovereignty as an excuse for sin, we need to go to Him and repent instead of concluding that God is not really sovereign after all.

God's sovereignty is actually a very freeing doctrine for us. It frees us to obey with joyful trust, security, and peace. As a believer, we should think like this: "Since God is sovereign, no obedience can harm my relationship with God and therefore no obedience, no matter how "foolish" it looks to the world and no matter the consequences, can ultimately harm me." Isn't that how Paul used the doctrine in Romans 8:28-36 ? He said "all things work together for good to those who love God" in verse 28 and then proceeded to explain the security this gives us through zealous, risk-taking obedience because "nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> If we are obedient Christians, we can always be fully satisfied in the hope that God's providence gives us--even when we experience difficult trials on this earth. The greatest inward desire of a Christian is that they delight in and be satisfied in God's glory and enjoy exalting Him to the highest possible extent. God's greatest desire, on the other hand, is also that He be exalted to the highest possible

Look at the way Paul applies the sovereignty of God to our obedience in Philippians 2:12-13: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; *for* it is God at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." According to Paul, the foundation of our obedience is the fact that God is ultimately the one who puts in us the willing and working of obedience. Paul did not say "God puts the willing and working in you, therefore stay in bed." On the contrary, he saw the sovereignty of God as deep, encouraging reason for risk-taking obedience!

Having understood how we make choices, we are now in a position to understand how God can control all things, and yet bring about His plan in a way that preserves human accountability and freedom. Proverbs 16:9 says "The mind of the man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps." This verse seems to affirm human freedom and God's absolute control over our freedom--in the same breath. How can this be consistent?

As we saw earlier, we always choose according to our greatest desire--we *always* choose the option that we most prefer. This makes every choice determined (it is determined that I will choose the option that I find most preferable), yet free (since we are not being forced to choose, but are choosing what we want to).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the act of choosing is always accompanied, subconsciously or consciously, with the process of thinking through the situation and the desires we have in order to *realize* which option we want the most. Once we realize which option we most prefer, we will then always decide upon that option. For example, when given the option of chocolate or white cake, I cannot and do not spontaneously *determine* that I will desire the white cake. Rather, I thoughtfully *recognize* that my greatest desire is for the white cake. Our choices are free and truly our choices because we think through the situation for ourselves and come to the conclusion about which choice is best through our own thought processes. Thus, "the mind of the man plans his way."

God, however, can still be ultimately in control and thus "direct our steps" by regulating our situations and thus the information that we base our choice upon. Since we will always choose the option that our mind finds most preferable in

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extent. And He is most glorified when His people are most satisfied in Him. Since God is sovereign--as well as infinitely passionate for His own glory--He will not let His passion to be glorified fail. In fact, He works all things together for His greatest glory which is our greatest good. And that means that an obedient Christian's passion to one day enjoy God's glory to the fullest possible extent cannot be disappointed!

<sup>3</sup> What about when you choose, for example, to study for a test when you really want to go to a movie that night? In that case, you desired the long-run benefits of the good grade that studying will bring more than the short term enjoyment a good movie will bring. So when you choose to study you are still choosing what you most prefer, all things considered.

light of the situation, God can simply make the circumstances such that the option we find most preferable (and thus the option we will choose) is the choice that He ordained for us to make. Our choice is free and truly ours since it is a result of our own reasoning and thought processes ("the mind of the man plans His way"), but God still controlled it because He ordered and directed the information our thought processes were based on to ensure that the choice we make is what He had willed ("the Lord directs His steps").

If someone we are talking to ever tries to use God's absolute sovereignty as an excuse not to seek God or obey Him, the solution is not to tell them that "God really is not absolutely sovereign--you have a free-will to choose against God's eternal purposes." Sinners, the Bible says, by nature flee from God and seek any excuse to justify their flight. An attempt to use God's sovereignty as an excuse to continue in sin reveals the person's sinfulness and need for God's grace. God's sovereignty is not the cause of indifference--sin is the cause. We should not lay blame where it does not belong.

So what we must do is not appeal to "free-will" in an attempt to convince the person that they must obey, but point out their sin to them and go to our knees and pray "God, I know you control all things. Therefore I pray that you would change my friend's heart and cause him to seek you. Please give him an irresistible desire for you." *God* is the answer to an unbeliever's flight from God, not free will. Appealing to their "free will" cannot help since their "free will" is unable to submit to God apart from His sovereign grace (Romans 8:7; John 6:44, 65). The sovereignty of God is not their problem, it is their only hope.

In conclusion, I had an experience last summer which perhaps sheds some light on this issue. I was on top of Pike's Peak in Colorado. The clouds above were black and threatening, but I wasn't very aware of the danger. I was enjoying the view from the top of the mountain in a wide open area far from any shelter. All of a sudden my hair stood up on end. It signaled to me that lightning was going to strike close to me, and soon. I had no control over whether I would be hit or not, and I knew it. I also knew that there was no place to seek cover from the lightning. Yet I did not just stand there and say "I am not in control of the situation, so come what may and let it hit me or not--I don't care." No--I was scared and ran for cover, even though I knew I couldn't make it. Knowing I was helpless was the reason I sought refuge.

It is a similar case with God's sovereignty. We are not in control--God is. But knowing this can perhaps be the means God uses to stir an idle saint to action. God's sovereignty, however, is slightly different from my lightning experience. If God starts us on the run for refuge in His mercy and goodness, it is not a futile hope. He will bring us safely to Himself.

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