



Grace Community Bible Church

ELDER'S PERSPECTIVE SERIES

The Sovereignty of God in Salvation

The Elder's Perspective series articulate key biblical and theological convictions of the Elders at Grace Community Bible Church.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN SALVATION

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, and 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, 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 any aspect of 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 (Ephesians 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" (Ephesians 1:11). "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" (Ephesians 1:4-5). 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" (Romans 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 to know and love and save them; and He chose them without regard to anything good or bad they might do. Scripture teaches 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).

Scripture affirms both divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

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understand how they correspond to one another.

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 purpose for allowing sin. Clearly, in the general sense, He allowed sin in order to display His glory—attributes that would not be revealed apart from evil—mercy, grace, compassion, forgiveness, and salvation. 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, but it does teach that God is utterly sovereign, perfectly holy, and absolutely just.

Admittedly, these 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 interact with each other. 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 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 these two realities can be true simultaneously cannot be understood by the human mind—only by God.

The Bible says that people go to hell because they refuse to believe. We believe that as strongly as we believe the doctrine of election. We believe the sinner is culpable, the sinner is guilty, the sinner is responsible to God and will be judged for his willful rejection. How God partners up His sovereign elective purpose with volition and human responsibility is maybe something God could have told us more about, but in the end no matter how much He told us about it, we still would not comprehend it. As John Murray once wrote: "In all major doctrines there's an apparent paradox that appears to us inscrutable." But, that is because we are dealing with the infinite with finite minds. It is wrong for people who believe strongly in human responsibility and human will, who see the call of the gospel extended universally, and the culpability of sinners clearly indicated in Scripture over and over and over again to, therefore assume that the doctrine of election is in violation of that and is not true.

It's also wrong for those who affirm :

- the sovereignty of God
- that the Lord does reign
- that He does what He will in heaven
- that His purposes are always fulfilled
- that He chooses us before the foundation of the world

to, therefore :

- eliminate human responsibility
- eliminate human culpability
- eliminate the sinners' responsibility to respond to the gospel,

and at the same time, to fail to carry the message of the gospel to the ends of the earth and preach it to every creature.

EVANGELISM

It is again very important to emphasize that even though God is the absolute Ruler of the universe, He still holds all men and women genuinely responsible for their actions (cf. James 1:13-16). Therefore we are all commanded to repent and believe in Christ (Acts 17:30) and will remain under the righteous judgment of God if we do not (John 3:36). How those two truths--Divine sovereignty and human responsibility--can be reconciled with one another is something that only God fully understands (Isaiah 55:8-9; Romans 11:33-36). We must humbly accept and affirm both, even if their relationship is incomprehensible to us (cf. Romans 9:18-23). In doing so, we thank God for His sovereign control but also work diligently to fulfill the responsibilities He has given to us (cf. Philippians 2:12-13).

One of those responsibilities is evangelism, and a biblical understanding of predestination often raises questions about why we even present the message of salvation to unbelievers. But a belief in God's sovereignty does not destroy the incentive for evangelism, as some think.

The confidence that God will give the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6; cf. Isaiah 55:11) breeds persistence and endurance in that task, as J.I. Packer asserts in his excellent book Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God: "*Far from making evangelism pointless, the sovereignty of God in grace is the one thing that prevents evangelism from being pointless. For it creates the possibility, indeed, the certainty, --that evangelism will be fruitful.*"

That is because of what Jesus said in John 6:37: "*All that the Father has given Me shall come unto Me.*" The results are guaranteed; God will save his people. And that truth was great comfort and incentive for Paul when God spoke to him in Corinth: "*Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city*" (Acts 18:10).

Our responsibility to proclaim the gospel is actually bolstered by the doctrine of predestination, because God works concurrently with our actions in accomplishing His plan. He uses means to accomplish His ends, and the means He has ordained in the salvation of men is evangelism. As J.I. Packer again writes, "*He sends us to act as vital links in the chain of His purpose for the salvation of His elect.*" Paul, after his most thorough discussion of God's sovereign choice in Romans 9 to 10, denounces the idea that evangelism is unnecessary:

"How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?" (Rom. 10:14-15)

So evangelism is indeed necessary, because God has commanded us to do it (Matthew 28:19-20) as the means for accomplishing His great plan of salvation in the world. How thankful we should be for the privilege of participating in His marvelous work!

CONCLUSION

Above all, one 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. Is man so foolish as to assume that he, a sinful creature, has a higher standard of what is right than an unfallen, infinite, eternal 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 man, 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).

The following chart of verses throughout the Scriptures gives a good overview of what God's Word teaches in respect to God's sovereignty in salvation and human responsibility:

The Responsibility of Man	The Inability of Man	God's Sovereignty in Salvation
Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Matthew 11:28	No one can come to Me.. John 6:44a	...unless the Father who sent Me draws him: and I will raise him up on the last day. John 6:44b
whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. John 3:16	men loved the darkness rather than the Light...and will not come into the light... John 3:19, 20	But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. John 3:21
Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is Isaiah 55:6	There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God. Romans 3:11	I was found by those who did not seek Me, I became manifest to those who did not ask for Me Romans 10:20b
This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ... 1 John 3:23	the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so. Romans 8:7 He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God. John 8:47	...and these whom He called, He also justified; Romans 8:30 When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. Acts 13:48
God...commands all men every where to repent. Acts 17:30	...the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him John 14:7	...if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth. 2 Timothy 2:25
... whoever will, let him take the water of life freely. Revelation 22:17b	So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy Romans 9:16	Your people shall be willing in the day of Your power... Psalm 110:3a
You must be born again. John 3:7	...unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. John 3:3a	Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God. 1 John 5:1
But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,... John 1:12	But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. 1 Corinthians 2:14	who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. John 1:13
that if you confess with your mouth Romans 10:9	no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," 1 Corinthians 12:3b	...except by the Holy Spirit.. 1 Corinthians 12:3b
...make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit: for why will you die, O house of Israel? Ezekiel 18:31	The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick Jeremiah 17:9	Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. Ezekiel 36:26
Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved... Acts 16:31	But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. John 10:26	My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. John 10:27,28



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