

Divine Sovereignty: Is God Sovereign or Am I Free?

ABSOLUTE sovereignty is based on the Biblical truth that God is the King over all. Unlike human kings, however, there is no limit to God's sovereignty—the entire universe utterly depends on him. Reformed theology has stressed God's sovereignty in at least three ways: creation, providence and grace.

In the first place, God is the sovereign Creator of all things. As the great King he simply commanded the universe into existence out of nothing (Ge 1:1-3). All things came into existence only through complete dependence on his creative power. God also demonstrated his sovereignty in creation by shaping and ordering the universe as he wished until it pleased him (Ge 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31).

In the second place, God continues to rule over all things and does with them as he pleases in his providential control of history. The vision of God on the throne appears throughout the Scriptures (1 Ki 22:19; Isa 6:1; Eze 1:26; Da 7:9; Rev 4:2; cf. Pss 11:4, 45:6; 47:8-9; Heb 12:2; Rev 3:21), and we are continually told in explicit terms that the LORD (Yahweh) reigns as king, exercising dominion over great and tiny things alike (Ex 15:18; Pss 47; 93; 96:10; 97; 99:1-5; 146:10; Pr 16:33; 21:1; Isa 24:23; 52:7; Da 4:34-35; 5:21-28; 6:26; Mt 10:29-31). God's dominion over history is total: he carries out all that he decrees, and none can stay his hand or thwart his eternal plan.

Third, God is sovereign in salvation as well. Many Christian traditions affirm God's general sovereignty over nature but hold that salvation is somehow not entirely a divine prerogative on which we utterly depend. The Scriptures teach, however, that God freely grants salvation to those he loves at his own discretion (Ex 33:19; Ro 9:15). In this way human beings are without exception completely dependent on God for salvation. From beginning to end, salvation is a gift rising out of God's grace (Dt 7:7ff; Eph 2:8-9). We cannot come to Christ initially unless the ability is given to us (Jn 6:44,65), nor can we continue in the faith by our own human effort (Gal 3:3-6). Moreover, we have no power to rise up and receive salvation on the day of judgment;

God's power raises us up in Christ (Eph 2:4-7). To be sure, the grace of God in our lives has the effect of holiness and obedience. Yet, we do not contribute in any way to our salvation (Php 2:12-13). This is the wonder of sovereign grace.

That God is sovereign in all these ways does not deny the reality of human dignity and choice. The Scriptures are clear that we are moral beings, answerable to God for what we do and fail to do (Dt 7:9-10). We are free agents (see theological article "The Freedom and Bondage of the Will" at Jos 24), whose choices have significant effects on history.

Needless to say, to believe both that God is absolutely sovereign and that humans are responsible, free agents stretches our mental capacities. Normally we link moral responsibility to the ability to act independently of control, but in the Biblical perspective we are both under God's control and morally responsible. It is a wondrous mystery that our sovereign God created us not as puppets but as moral creatures, but this is often a difficult concept for Christians to accept. Paul himself anticipated an objection to the teaching of God's sovereign grace that is still popular today: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" (Ro 9:19). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that it is precisely because God is utterly sovereign that he can determine the responsibilities we bear. It is because he is in control that he can be our judge.

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