



The Sovereignty of God in Salvation

By Charlie Frederico

The sovereignty of God is a breath-taking doctrine. The depths and heights of God's absolute rulership are too high to scale and too deep to fathom.¹ It is no wonder that David wrote, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain to it."² Just the thought that there is a Being Whose power and ability are infinite and Whose will knows no bounds, brings out of us an awe and amazement like nothing else. The contemplation of a God Who is not the author of sin, and yet sin and its existence bow the knee to Him, is difficult to grasp.

The realities of culpability and responsibility are also challenged by the sovereignty of God. To allow Satan to tempt mankind and to give him the ability to wreak havoc on mankind does not in any way make God responsible for that havoc directly. And yet, God does take responsibility for granting Satan the permission to wreak the havoc. For example, when God allowed Satan to devastate Job by calamity, it was only because Satan was angered by God's statement concerning Job's righteousness (Job 1:8). In our own finiteness, we might blame God for Job's calamity, but righteous Job did not (Job 1:22). Again, when Satan demanded permission to sift Peter as

wheat, God allowed it (Luke 22:31). Never once do you see Peter blaming God for the sifting. On the contrary, it was by this sifting that Peter was able to write a first-hand account of how Satan is a roaring lion who loves to devour Christians.³ In fact, this experience confirmed God's absolute sovereignty for Peter!⁴ Thus, we have to agree with James that God tempts no one to sin.⁵

The creation account of the first chapter of Genesis is, above all else, a narrative of the sovereignty of God. This chapter makes the reader realize that God is the absolute monarch over all created things. It would be helpful to review this section of Scripture in our overview of

this subject.

By virtue of the design and creation of the heavens and the earth, God shows that He rules over them. The “heavens” refers to the vastness of space beginning within our own atmosphere.⁶ In the heavens God has placed the sun, the moon, and the stars.⁷ These solar bodies are held in the heavens and sustained in the heavens by God’s sovereign power.⁸ The “earth” refers to all that is on this planet, specifically the dry land and all that lives on it.⁹ The vegetation and the animals were created to dwell on the earth and from the earth to be fed.¹⁰ The seas were established and fixed in their boundaries on the earth.¹¹ And all of this was under God’s perfect control. No man can claim the power to maintain any of it. It was all maintained under the sovereign hand of God.¹²

When God created man, He displayed for us the wonder and awe of His power and His creativity. Adam and Eve were fashioned to be the image of God on earth. No animal on the earth or in the waters could match God’s creation of man.¹³ Man is unique. He is a walking display of the power of God. And yet, in all of his grandeur, man is still under the dominion of God Himself. There is no indication

in Scripture that God ever abdicated His rulership to Adam and Eve. There is no suggestion anywhere that God shares His supremacy over creation with human beings. Adam and Eve are “living beings”¹⁴ and as such they do not have attributes of omnipotence and ultimate sovereignty. God did give Adam and Eve rulership over the creation as managers or stewards¹⁵ but that is a far cry from rulership. Rulership has been reserved for God alone.¹⁶

Therefore, in light of this demonstration that God is sovereign over *creation*, especially over the creation of man, why do people today find it hard to believe that God is sovereign over *salvation*? Cannot He Who *created* the human mind, will, and soul,¹⁷ also *control* it? Cannot He Who gave Adam the breath of life (a reference to the creation of the soul),¹⁸ also control it? How can anyone say to God, “You are sovereign and have absolute control over everything in creation except me?”

The problems that people have with the sovereignty of God in reference to salvation are manifold. But before we look at these problems, we should say a few words about the nature of the arguments themselves.

First of all, when we enter into discussions about God, there are parameters. By that I mean that there are things that we cannot know. If Genesis 1:1 is true and the same God Who created the universe is the same God Whom we are discussing, then we cannot pretend to comprehend all that He does. There are mysteries about God. Thus, any discussion we have about Him should humble us since everything about Him is magnificent and incredible and, to be sure, beyond our comprehension.

A very powerful illustration of this is the day when God met with Moses before Israel on Mount Sinai. In Exodus 19:18-25 we have the historical event where Israel, led by Moses, approaches God. The picture is set in verse 17 where Moses and Israel approach the mountain. Starting in verse 18, God descends upon the mountain and as a result, smoke and fire spew from it and a violent earthquake occurs all around it. After this, a loud trumpet blasts announces the arrival of God in verse 19 and God calls Moses up to the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments.

The ceremony was exhilarating. More than that, it was fearful! Deuteronomy tells us of the reaction of the people.

It says that they were devastated by the event.¹⁹ The very fact that God had spoken with them and they lived to tell about it was profound for them. God revealed Himself to these people and they were terrified, yet they lived. The Book of Exodus says that they trembled.²⁰ That day, God demonstrated that He is a consuming fire to them.²¹ However, God is a consuming fire for the church as well. The writer of Hebrews tells us that because we have more revelation about God, we should fear God even more.²² Why? Because God is a consuming fire.²³ Therefore, this discussion about God is no trite discussion. We are talking about a God Who consumes us and strikes fear into our hearts.

Second, this discussion is not a philosophical inquiry. Philosophy is, by etymology, the “love of wisdom.” This love includes an interest in all kinds of ideas, whether true ones or false ones.²⁴ The goal of philosophy is a deeper knowledge of ideas.²⁵ In contrast, the goal of Scripture is truth via revelation. It is important that this discussion about the sovereignty of God in relation to salvation is more than just an interest in one idea among a thousand. It needs to be a quest for truth. Not someone’s view of truth. Not one truth among other truths.

But the truth revealed by God in His Word. This discussion needs to lead us to fear and tremble before God as we come to a greater understanding of His Word. As the Lord said through the Prophet Isaiah, “But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.”²⁶ If men are willing to be humble and contrite of spirit and tremble at the word of God, then this discussion will bear fruit. Otherwise, it will develop into a mere wrangling of words.²⁷

THE ARGUMENT OVER THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Dave Hunt, author of *What Love Is This? Calvinism’s Misrepresentation of God*,²⁸ has asserted that the central issue in Calvinism “is God’s love and character in relation to mankind, as presented in Scripture.”²⁹ In other words, if God sovereignly chooses some to salvation and ignores others and those others go to Hell, how could God be a loving God as Calvinists claim? The accusation is that the God of Calvinism is unloving for sending some to hell for their sins when He could have stopped it.

In some ways, this is a reasonable argument. If God is love and God is also omnipotent, then why doesn’t He

just give everyone a heart to believe the gospel?

But in response, it is important that we reaffirm some basic doctrines. First, God is love.³⁰ It is impossible to deny this reality and still believe in the God of the Bible. How do we know that God is love? The love of God is demonstrated supremely by the death, burial, and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ.³¹ In His love for sinners, God punished His Son in our place.³² In His love, the precious Son of God was rejected by those whom He loved.³³ In His love, God allowed Judas to betray Jesus, even with a kiss, a sign of affection.³⁴ In His love, Jesus refused to call legions of angels to His side to defend Him.³⁵ In His love, the Father rejected the Son for the first time in eternity past³⁶ because of our sins and not because of His own.³⁷

How does the Bible’s teaching on the love of God coincide with Mr. Hunt’s definition of love? Consider this: if God, in love, is willing to treat His own Son like this, then why should we think that God is too unloving to condemn us for our own sins? Are we more deserving of gentle treatment than Jesus Christ?

Along these lines, it is important to remember that God’s ways of

accomplishing His will are not our ways.³⁸ The distance of our thoughts and ways from God’s thoughts and ways is the distance from the lowest depths of the earth to the highest reaches of the heavens.³⁹ It is impossible, as modern space exploration tells us, to plumb the depths of space. It is equally impossible to plumb the depths of the heart and mind of the God Who created that space! In fact, only God the Son and God the Spirit know the heart and mind of God.⁴⁰ Therefore, who are we to demand that God should reveal to us His ways and His thoughts? Furthermore, the revelation we have in Scripture is more than enough for us to know God.⁴¹ What we do have in Scripture is enough for us and it is very generous.

Second, Mr. Hunt also states that God’s character is part of the central issue in Calvinism’s misunderstanding of God’s sovereignty. God’s character is in question, says Hunt, if we hold to the teaching that God will punish sinners who do not believe the Gospel when He could have changed their minds to allow them to do so.

However, what kind of character would God have if He did *not* punish sin? What kind of standard would He demonstrate if He changed everyone’s

will? What kind of precedent would He be setting if He did not hold people responsible for their own sins? To what degree would God display His righteous character if He did *not* punish sinners, even those sinners whom He could have changed? To impugn God’s character because He does not change everyone’s will is to assign to God a preconceived idea of what God should be like and to condemn God for not conforming to that preconceived idea. That line of thinking is nothing more than an attempt to form God into an image that is more like us.

The sum of these points is a rejection of the consistent and overwhelming Biblical reality that God is absolutely sovereign, *especially* in the realm of the salvation of sinners.

THE SOLUTION TO THE ARGUMENT OVER THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

As was mentioned before, the sovereignty of God over creation is a very clear teaching of Scripture. This world is beyond our understanding. We cannot explain light nor gravity, let alone the material of deep space. The clockwork motion of the earth and the moon confuses us. We scratch our heads at the perfect balance between

the earth and sun. We stand in awe at the beauty and wonder of space. Try as we might, there is simply too much to discover. Do we ever stop to consider that all of this is held in place by the direct and powerful command of God!⁴² How wonderful is His glory and power in the heavens.⁴³

However, as we enter into a discussion on the prerogatives of God over the human soul, we need to have that same amazement and wonder. As mentioned above, we cannot believe that God is sovereign over the universe without believing that He is sovereign over our hearts as well. After all, He created us just as He created the universe.

But what exactly does God's sovereignty over the will of man look like?

1. God has the ability to change the sinner's heart.

The fact that the sinner's heart needs to change is indisputable. The condition of the heart of an unconverted man is deplorable in the extreme. The sinner's heart is described as full of all kinds of wickedness, both conceivable and inconceivable.⁴⁴ It is a dead heart.⁴⁵ It is totally lifeless and incapable of making any righteous decisions on its own.

God sums up the horrible condition of the heart of man in Ezekiel 36:1-24. The term used in this passage to describe the heart of man is that of a stone. Spiritually speaking, the human heart is hard. It is unresponsive. It is cold and inanimate. Zechariah refers to the "flinty" heart of those that refused to listen to the Law of God.⁴⁶ It is a heart that is dead and unresponsive to the Law of God. But something miraculous has been promised by the Lord. This heart will begin to pump blood and transform from a hard grey rock to a pink soft living organ. This heart, which once was dead, will come to life. Of course, the figure is not speaking of physical life. It is speaking of a heart that has been cleansed from its filthiness into perfect purity.

And what is amazing about this situation is that *this will not be done by the person himself!* Not once in Ezekiel 36 does the passage mention the sinner's responsibility. And later on in the Bible, this text is the basis for Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel, concerning the new birth.⁴⁷ The new birth occurs not when a person decides that Jesus really meant what He said but when God changes the heart of stone into the heart of flesh. A person is not saved when they come to their senses but when God cleanses them

from their filth and idols and implants His Spirit into them, causing⁴⁸ them to obey His statutes.

2. Man has no ability to change his own heart.

Second, even if man did want to accept the wonderful salvation offered in Jesus Christ, he could not do so on his own. Salvation comes only as a result of repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ.⁴⁹ Repentance is "[I]n a religious sense implying pious sorrow for unbelief and sin and a turning from them unto God and the gospel of Christ."⁵⁰ Apart from these two conditions, salvation does not come.

However, Jesus taught that men love sin⁵¹ and refuse to come to the light so that they may continue to sin.⁵² They do this because their very nature is corrupt and dark. It is described as a "bad tree" which *cannot* produce "good fruit."⁵³ Even the good that a person does is "filthy rags" before God since the nature of the sinner is not changed.⁵⁴ The reality is that men do not change their nature on their own. The Prophet Jeremiah wrote, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then you also cannot do good, who are accustomed to doing evil."⁵⁵ The man or woman whose nature is sinful and wicked can no more do good

than a leopard can change his spots to stripes or the Ethiopian can change his skin from dark to light. That picture is clear and unmistakable. Therefore, on our own, we stand condemned by God and under His condemnation for our sins.

3. God has the prerogative to refuse to change some men's hearts.

Third, God is not to be judged for saving some, changing their nature, and leaving others in sin. God has the right to leave some men in their sins. Why does this bother us? Because, in our pride, we believe that we deserve something better than what God is giving us. We want to believe that our free will is the greatest thing in the universe and that for God to deny us that free will is for Him to be guilty of cosmic treason. We question God's "fairness" when it is actually unfair for God to let any guilty sinner into Heaven. Fairness means we all go to Hell.

Paul rebuked the imaginary opponent in Romans 9 for questioning God's fairness in relation to the salvation of sinners. The dialogue goes like this, "If God alone decides who is saved and who is not, and He alone has mercy on whom He will, then why does He

still blame us for not repenting and believing in His Son” (v. 19)? When we ask this question, we are forgetting that the real issue is not the grace of God; it the guilt of our own sins. Paul sees this line of reasoning as “answer[ing] back to God” and is grounds for punishment (v.20). Much like a child who rejects the judgment of his father and accuses the father of being unfair in punishing him, we dare to rebuke God for choosing some and not choosing others.

And because of the foolishness of this, Paul does not give a satisfactory answer to the mocker. Instead, Paul appeals to the reality that God is the Potter and we are the clay.⁵⁶ He appeals to the truth that, regardless of whether we like it or not, God is the Creator and we are the created. The point of the discussion is this: do not forget to whom you are speaking! We do not have the right to question the God of the universe. We are the molded, He is the One Who molds.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the spiritual condition of mankind is bleak. The heart of man is filled with “only evil continually”⁵⁷ and as such cannot be changed by the sinner’s own will. This is because, quite simply, man does not *want* to change. However, the teaching of the

sovereignty of God brings clarity and brilliance to the situation. God desires that all men everywhere repent⁵⁸ and He in fact declares that all men *should* repent.⁵⁹ Yet, only God determines who will be saved and only God has the ability to make salvation happen.

We are in a dire situation. We are guilty of sin. We have a darkened mind and heart and we are responsible for it. We are daily on the fringes of judgment with nothing to support us except the very patience of God, and we can do nothing to change any of that.

And we need to understand that this is exactly where we need to be. Here, in this desperate situation the beauty of the grace, mercy and omnipotence of God is revealed. Here and only here is where God is glorified for everything that happens in our salvation. If we had any part in any of our redemption, it would not reveal the glory of God in its fullness.

End Notes

1 Rom 11:33-35.

2 Ps 139:6.

3 1 Pet 5:8.

4 1 Pet 5:11.

5 Js 1:13.

6 Gen 1:1, 8.

7 Gen 1:14-19.

8 Heb 1:3b.

9 Gen 1:10a.

10 Ps 104:14-17.

11 Gen 1:10b; Ps 104:6-9

12 Gen 1:1; Job 38:9-10, 31-33.

13 Gen 2:20.

14 Gen 2:7.

15 Gen 1:28; Ps 8.

16 Rev 19:1.

17 See Is 42:5.

18 Although some would say that this simply refers to the breath that we breath (see excursus in Mathews, K. A. Vol. 1A, Genesis 1-11:26 The New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995], 196), it would seem better to understand this event as God actually imparting a soul (or spirit) to Adam at this point. Although a word study of *nephesh* would find it used very often as a reference to mere ‘breath’ (Deut 20:16; Joshua 11:11, 14; 1 Kings

15:29; 17:17), word studies alone do not indicate the meaning of the word in every case. Context determines meaning. Thus, it is best to understand that Genesis 2:7 refers to the impartation of the soul into Adam via the “breath of God” (Num 16:22; Ecc 12:7; Isa 57:16; Zech 12:1).

19 Deut 5:22-25.

20 Ex 19:16.

21 Deut 4:24.

22 Heb 2:1-4.

23 Heb 12:25-29.

24 J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2008), 22. “What causes this odd state of affairs (referring to the assertion that all Christians believe in the sovereignty of God, but some imagine they do not)? The root cause is the same as in most cases of error in the church—the intruding of rationalistic speculations, the passion for systematic consistency, a reluctance to recognize the existence of mystery and to let God be wiser than men, and a consequent subjecting of Scripture to the supposed demands of human logic.” In other words, we have an inordinate desire to demand that God be more understandable than He has revealed Himself to be in Scripture.

25 Luke’s comment on the behavior of the Athenians is appropriate here: “Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21).

26 Isa 66:2.

- 27 2 Tim 2:14.
- 28 What Love Is This? Calvinism's Misrepresentation of God (Bend, Ore.: Berean Call, 2004).
- 29 Dave Hunt and James White, Debating Calvinism (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2004), 21.
- 30 1 Jn 4:8.
- 31 Rom 5:8.
- 32 Is 53:10-12.
- 33 Jn 1:11.
- 34 Matt 26:14-16, 47-50.
- 35 Matt 26:53.
- 36 Mk 15:34.
- 37 2 Cor 5:21.
- 38 Isa 55:8-9.
- 39 Isa 55:9.
- 40 Jn 8:55: 1 Cor 2:10-11.
- 41 Deut 29:29.
- 42 Heb 1:3.
- 43 Ps 19:1.
- 44 Mk 7:21-23.
- 45 Eph 2:1-3.
- 46 Zech 7:12.
- 47 Jn 3:5.
- 48 Ashah, "to make" or "to manufacture" (William Holladay and Ludwig Koehler, A Concise Hebrew and Aramiac Lexicon of the Old Testament of the Old Testament (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 284). This word also is used in portions of Scripture, i.e. Genesis 1:7, 16, 25, to describe a creation or making of something. The subject of this verb is not the man, but it is God Himself.
- 49 Matt 4:17; Lk 13:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 26:18-20.
- 50 Spiros Zodhiates, The Complete Word Study Dictionary : New Testament, electronic ed. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000, c1992, c1993), G3340.
- 51 Jn 3:19.
- 52 Jn 3:20.
- 53 Matt 7:17-20.
- 54 Isa 64:6.
- 55 Jer 13:23.
- 56 Isa 64:8; Gen 2:7.
- 57 Gen 6:5.
- 58 2 Pet 3:9.
- 59 Acts 17:30.

