

Theology for Life
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 7: God's Sovereignty

Last time: *God is One Being in Three Persons. This reality is difficult to understand but there are many advantages in understanding his nature. The Trinity teaches us that God is relational; it means we can know God through Jesus; and, it teaches us that he has integrity, he is One.*

God's Eternal Decree

WCF 5.1. *God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.*

Nehemiah 9:6 *"You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.*

Psalms 145:14–16

[14] *The LORD upholds all who are falling
and raises up all who are bowed down.*
[15] *The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.*
[16] *You open your hand;
you satisfy the desire of every living thing.*

Hebrews 1:3 *He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,*

Scripture teaches that God is in control of everything. He is not just a watchmaker that sets up the universe and lets it go on its own. God's providence is not a maintenance plan where God only comes in to fix problems as they arise.

Common Concerns or Objections

1. Does this mean that God is the author of evil or sin?

Isaiah 45:7 *I form light and create darkness;
I make well-being and create calamity;
I am the LORD, who does all these things.*

This question is usually posed as an "either/or." Rabbi Kushner in his bestselling book *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* argues that God is either all good or all powerful; he can't be both. Given the choice, most would much rather abandon the idea of God's sovereignty to cling to the hope that God is good.

This, though, is a false choice. God is both good and in control. God is not a spectator, but actively works good at all times.

One solution: We can resolve the tension by saying the God permits evil; he doesn't cause it. But, in saying this, we don't mean that he steps away from the controls in those moments.

The answer is not to reduce God's sovereignty, making God less than God.

WCF 8.2. *Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath he not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.*

God's goodness includes his ability to control all things. God determines **how long** and **to what extent** he will let evil go. And, God will determine **how he will overcome** or **work it for good**. God's sovereignty isn't simply foreknowing; it is actively bringing about whatever comes to pass.

Look at the examples from scripture:

Genesis 50:20

[20] As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

Joseph's brothers were intent on doing evil, yet God took their act and transformed it for his good purposes.

Let's take this to an extreme example: What is the greatest act of evil that mankind has ever done? From the Bible's perspective, it is the crucifixion of Christ.

Acts 2:23

[23] this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

God could take the greatest evil humanity could devise and turn its purpose into the greatest good done on earth.

2. Does belief in God's sovereignty deny human free will?

WCF 8.1 "...nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."

Michael Horton explains:

"Scripture clearly holds human beings responsible for hardening their hearts against his word and will, and it also teaches that God hardens hearts (Ex 3:19; 6:1; 7:3, 13, 22; 8:15, 19; Ro 9:18). Yet God's sovereign agency is not the same in hardening hearts as it is in softening them. In the latter case, God gives his redeemed a new heart (Jer 31:32-33; Eze 11:19), but in the former case God gives the wicked over to their own desires:

“So I gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity” (Ro 1:24). God’s permission of sin is not a mere acquiescence, but is a determination that ensures its defeat.”

This idea of “contingency of second causes” is hard for our minds to comprehend, but it is not irrational or impossible. God can both decree some action of ours, and we can freely choose to do that very same thing.

God can sovereignly plan the results and the means of getting there. He can determine that you will show up at church, and he can determine that you will show up there on the basis of your own free choice. The first cause is God’s decree; the second cause is your planning, weighing options, getting counsel, and making a choice.

This is why when we sin, God can hold us accountable. Even when he works the results out for good, we are responsible for our evil intentions. For instance, we can’t argue with God that our angry outburst is justified because God used it to turn someone to prayer.

*The Bible takes sin seriously because it takes man (male and female) seriously... Christians do not deny the fact- in some circumstances- of diminished responsibility, but we affirm that diminished responsibility always entails diminished humanity. To say that somebody "is not responsible for his actions" is to demean him or her as a human being. It is part of the glory of being human that we are held responsible for our actions. **John Stott**, The Cross of Christ*

Sovereignty in Prayer

Does God’s sovereignty ever keep you from praying to God?

Charles Spurgeon

It is well said that "asking is the rule of the kingdom." It is a rule that will never be altered in any body's case. If the royal and divine Son of God cannot be exempted from the rule of asking that He may have, you and I cannot expect to have the rule relaxed in our favor. God will bless Elijah and send rain on Israel, but Elijah must pray for it. If the chosen nation is to prosper, Samuel must plead for it. If the Jews are to be delivered, Daniel must intercede. God will bless Paul, and the nations shall be converted through him, but Paul must pray. Pray he did, without ceasing; his epistles show that he expected nothing except by asking for it.

Benjamin Palmer on God's sovereignty and prayer:

The scriptural principle is not that favors are, by our importunity, wrung from the reluctance of the Divine Being, but that they antedate the prayer in the determinations of His sovereign and gracious will; and the true spirit of prayer, which He also imparts, is the sign and pledge of the gift to be conveyed. Prayer then, as already stated, is not the cause which procures through its own efficiency, but merely the antecedent condition upon which a predetermined benefit is suspended. The purpose to give is, on Jehovah's part, sovereign and free; it is the spontaneous movement of His own gracious and loving will. Yet, in the exercise of the same sovereignty and goodness, He interposes the prayer of the creature as the channel through which His favor shall descend.

Sovereignty in Salvation

Section 3-5 deals with the most difficult aspects of God's sovereignty. Is he even in control to determine who receives salvation and who is condemned?

Van Til observes:

"all Christians affirm God's sovereignty over creation (that is, they agree that they are men and not dogs because God chose to make them men and not dogs); and almost all affirm His sovereignty over providence (that is, they would die tomorrow if God has not numbered their days differently); yet not all affirm His sovereignty over redemption. Calvinism understands them to be related. Either the Creator is completely free to do as He wishes with His creation (including determining, solely of His own will, whether immortality will even be offered to it), or He is not free to do so."

WCF 8.3-5

3. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death.

4. These angels and men, thus predestinated, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

5. Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.

The doctrine of predestination does not originate with John Calvin; it comes from the Bible.

- The word "predestined" is found in Romans 8:29,30 and Ephesians 1:5,11.
- The words "elect" and "election" are used 14 times in the New Testament.
- The idea of God's sovereignty (control) in the salvation of sinners is found throughout the Bible (Mt. 24:22; Mk. 13:27; Rom. 11:7; II Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1; I Peter 1:1; Acts 13:48; Jn. 6:37; 10:27-29; 6:39, 44, 65; 17:6,9)

Predestination is not fatalism. It is not the case that some people want to come to Christ but cannot since God has not predestined them. This is not the case.

Connecting the Dots: Where Theology meets Life

Summary: God is in control of all things. He doesn't just foresee the events; he is in control. Rather than being bad news, this is essential to our hope in a good end of all things.

- How does this belief empower you to pray?