

What Does the Bible Say About Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility?

D.A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?* (IVP, 1990)

J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (IVP, 1986)

Summary:

People sometimes feel that a belief in the all-powerful God of the Bible necessitates a kind of philosophical fatalism. For instance, people ask, “If God is all powerful and all loving, why do people suffer?” Or, again, people ask, “If God is all powerful, why pray?” These questions are at root confusions about the relationship between the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. According to the Bible, the sovereignty of God *and* human responsibility are *both* true. The Bible frequently and persistently asserts that God is both absolutely and completely sovereign over all the affairs, actions, thinking and believing of humanity *and* we are morally responsible for our actions.

[Note: This is *not* an attempt to reconcile these dual statements of the Bible *philosophically*, nor an extended discussion of the *pastoral* implications for our trials and sufferings, nor dealing with such matters as “particular redemption.” For a profound and helpful pastoral emphasis see the recently republished, *The Suffering of Man and the Sovereignty of God* by Charles Spurgeon. For a detailed consideration of the duality of these statements, see D.A. Carson *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, Cambridge University, Ph.D. Thesis]

1. God’s sovereignty is undeniably taught in Scripture, but never in such a way as to deny human responsibility.

i. The Bible frequently affirms God’s total sovereignty over humanity, the universe, and all existence.

The God of the Bible is the God of *all* – of everything and everyone, of every deed and every thought. The evidence for this being the Bible’s view of God is sustained and incontrovertible. We can barely touch the surface of the many texts here.

- a. “Why do the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’ Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him” (Psalm 115:2-3). “The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths” (Psalm 135:6).
- b. God is the one who “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:11).
- c. If the birds feed, it is because the Father feeds them (Matt. 6:26); if wild flowers bedeck the meadow, it is because God clothes the grass (Matt. 6:30).
- d. God’s sovereignty is so broadly inclusive that, from a biblical point of view, it is not surprising to find, say, unintentional manslaughter (Exodus 21:13) and family misfortune (Ruth 1:13, 20) both related to the will of God.
- e. Nor is the human will exempt from this sway. “The king’s heart [the center of human personality, the origin of human choice and freedom] is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases” (Prov. 21:1). It’s not just kings: “In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines the steps” (Prov. 16:9). “I know, O LORD, that a man’s life is not his own; it is not for a man to direct his steps” (Jer. 10:23).
- f. While God “does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men” (Lam. 3:33), still “Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?” (Lam. 3:37-38). God hardens whomever he pleases (Romans 9:18). Shimei is wicked to curse the Lord’s anointed but David rightly understands that behind Shimei is the God who commanded him so to speak (2 Sam. 16:10). God himself sends certain wicked people a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie (2 Thess. 2:11). God himself, in his wrath, incites David to number the people (2 Sam. 24:1).

ii. The Bible clearly affirms, nonetheless, human responsibility.

The remarkable thing about all these – and many, many other – statements about God being sovereign is that his sovereignty is never described in such a way as to function to exonerate the human agent of responsibility. David, for instance, though incited to take a census, is held wholly responsible for his act. Those who are powerfully deluded can also be described as those who refuse “to love the truth and so be saved.” At no point does the absolute sovereignty of God mitigate the responsibility of human beings. The responsibility of human beings is described in the Bible in equal detail to God’s sovereignty: “Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness.... But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD”

(Josh. 24:14-15). But even more remarkably, the Bible frequently affirms that God is sovereign and humans are responsible in the same place, as we consider next.

2. Some of the dual statements about God's sovereignty and our responsibility

- i. The Bible frequently affirms that we are responsible for our actions, often in the same breath, even the same verse, as saying that God is totally sovereign.
 - a. After Jacob's death, Joseph's brothers appear before him wondering whether he will exact revenge on them for their act of selling him into slavery in Egypt. Joseph is merciful, knowing that, as he says, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:19-20).
 - b. Commands to be holy are combined with an assurance that God is the one who does the work. "Consecrate [same root word as 'holy' in Hebrew: *make yourselves holy*] yourselves and be holy, because I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and follow them. I am the LORD who makes you holy" (Leviticus 20:7-8).
 - c. At the dedication of the temple Solomon not only asks that God will forgive his people their sins when they repent, but also can say, "May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways and to keep the commands, decrees and regulations he gave our fathers." (1 Kings 8:58).
 - d. The mighty Assyrian nation is simply God's "rod" and his "club" who are "sent" as agents of wrath against his covenant people. Yet he also judges Assyria for what they are doing. Why if they are the "rod" of his anger? Because of the Assyrian pride which says, "By the strength of my hand I have done this, and by my wisdom, because I have understanding." (Isaiah 10:13).
 - e. When Paul arrives in Corinth he is tired and discouraged. In this context God graciously speaks to Paul in a night vision and reassures him: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." Paul takes this message about God's sovereign control over election – those who are his but not yet converted – not as a disincentive to action but instead a motivation to "keep on speaking" and he stays for another year and a half. God's sovereignty functions as an incentive to evangelism (Acts 18:9-10).
 - f. Paul urges the Philippians to put effort in for their salvation *because* it is God who does the saving! "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13).
 - g. After Peter and John have been released from prison they go back to the church and gather together to pray. Their prayer not only begins with a "sovereign Lord" affirmation but also takes its fuel for prayer from the fact that they saw their persecution as the plan of God fulfilled, as promised in the Bible. In other words, the strong belief in God's sovereignty was a *motivation* to pray (Acts 4:23-31).
- ii. As far as the Bible is concerned then, both these statements – God is sovereign and we are responsible – are true.

The Bible, contrary to the view of some contemporary theologians and philosophers, asserts unembarrassedly both the absolute sovereignty of God and human responsibility, often at the same time, to be true and consistent. *Both* statements are true, not one or the other, or half one and half the other, but *both*. The Bible thinks in these terms even at the center of the Christian message and of Christian devotion, at the cross of Jesus Christ: "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross" (Acts 2:23).

Conclusion: A. The Bible teaches that God is *both* sovereign and we are responsible. B. This is ultimately a *mystery*. We can think of the mystery in more or less helpful ways, but the sovereignty of God and human responsibility remains, nevertheless, a mystery.

Final Thoughts: According to J.I. Packer, all heresies come from the reductionistic move of turning mysteries into logic. According to D.A. Carson the mystery of God's sovereignty and human responsibility ultimately resides in the person of God, who is, mysteriously, both transcendent and immanent. Christians are asked to believe this mystery – not without good reason, but without complete logical satisfaction, at least in this life. Like the Trinity or the nature of Christ, the doctrine of God's sovereignty and human responsibility is one which touches on the very person of God and as such is comfortingly revealed to be far above the reach of our human minds.