

The Sovereignty of God in the Lives of Men

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Though men may think they make their own choices in life and choose the paths they will take, it is ultimately God who plans the course that a man will take, and it is ultimately God’s purpose for his life that will prevail. Whatever a man may do, whether he does good or evil, God’s plan and purpose for His creation will be realized. The course of action that a man takes and the path that he follows are but a part of the larger will, plan and purpose of our all-powerful, all-knowing, and sovereign God.

In his prayer the prophet Jeremiah said: “I know, O Lord, that a man’s way is not in himself, nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps.” (Jeremiah 10:23). Another similar verse is found in Proverbs: “The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.” (Proverbs 16:9). The Scriptures teach that a man’s life is not his own, and regardless of whatever plans he may map out for his life, ultimately it will be the Lord who directs his steps and determines the paths he will take, and it is ultimately the Lord’s purpose for his life that will prevail.

Two more verses from Proverbs also emphasize the sovereignty of God in the lives of men. In Proverbs 19 we read: “Many plans are in a man’s heart, but the

counsel of the Lord will stand.” (Proverbs 19:21). And in Proverbs 20, we read: “Man’s steps are ordained by the Lord; how then can man understand his way?” (Proverbs 20:24).

A man may be convinced that he chooses his own course of action for his own purposes and benefit. However, the Bible reveals that a man’s steps are ordained by the Lord, and that ultimately God’s purpose will be realized as a result of the things he does. With the question, “How then can man understand his way”, the Scripture is teaching us that men cannot fully understand the paths they travel during the course of their lives, or the things that happen to them along the way.

As believers, our loving and sovereign God determined long ago His plan and purpose for our lives, and the paths that we would travel. These are paths that He has chosen for us and paths in which He directs us, through the circumstances that unfold during the course of our lives, and as a result of the limitations He has placed upon us. All of the events of our lives were decided long ago by God Himself, who foreknew all of His people from before the creation of the world. The psalmist wrote: “And in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them.” (Psalm 139:16).

The Sovereignty of God in the Lives of Unbelievers

Just as God’s sovereign purpose is accomplished in our lives as believers for our good and future glory together with His Son Jesus Christ in Heaven, so also God’s sovereign purpose is accomplished in the lives of those who do not know Him. In 2 Kings 19, we read that Sennacherib, king of Assyria, had conquered many nations, and he was at this point in time coming to make war against Jerusalem. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah about him saying:

“Have you not heard?
Long ago I did it;
From ancient times I planned it.
Now I have brought it to pass,
That you should turn fortified cities into ruinous heaps.”
(2 Kings 19:25, Isaiah 37:26)

God ordained that Sennacherib would conquer nations, but then the time came when God also brought about his downfall. In response to Sennacherib’s threat to invade and conquer Israel just as he had done to other nations, Hezekiah,

king of Judah, prayed to the Lord for deliverance and received his answer through the prophet Isaiah: the Assyrians would not enter Jerusalem.

As they were encamped and preparing to attack Israel, an angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. Sennacherib withdrew, and sometime later as he was worshipping in the temple of one of his gods, he was killed by two of his own sons (2 Kings 19:35-37). God ordained that he would conquer nations, and God ordained his downfall.

In Exodus 4-14, there are several references to God having hardened Pharaoh's heart against Himself and the demands of Moses to let His people go. The Scriptures tell us that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in order that He might display His power in delivering His people from Pharaoh's hand (Romans 9:17). Another similar example of God hardening the heart of a ruler against Himself and His purpose is recorded in Deuteronomy 2.

As the people of Israel were moving toward the Jordan River to cross over into the land that the Lord was giving to them, they had to first pass through the land of Heshbon. Moses sent messengers to the king of Heshbon, asking that they be allowed to pass through and to buy food.

But the Lord hardened the heart of the king of Heshbon against the request of Moses, so that He might deliver the king, his army, and the land of Heshbon into the hands of the Israelites through victory in battle, as we read in Deuteronomy: "But Sihon king of Heshbon was not willing for us to pass through his land; for the Lord your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, in order to deliver him into your hand, as he is today." (Deuteronomy 2:30). So yet again we see from the Scriptures that God hardened the spirit of a pagan king against Himself and His people Israel, so that He might demonstrate His power in delivering His people.

Our sovereign God controls the thoughts and the actions of the rulers of the earth. God raises them up and gives them power, and He determines the course of action they take while they are in power. In Proverbs 21 we read: "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes." (Proverbs 21:1).

It is clear from the instruction given to us in the Scriptures that our sovereign God controls the thoughts and the actions of the rulers of the earth, and that it is He who has raised them up and put them into power. At this point, considering the atrocities and sufferings that are brought about in the lives of thousands or even

millions when these rulers embark upon a course of war or other policies that cause harm in the lives of many, we may question why God would allow such things to happen, when He surely could have prevented them.

As we seek answers from the Scriptures, we recall that Isaiah 55:8-9 teaches that God's ways and thoughts are above the ways and thoughts of men. Paul also taught in Romans 11:33 that God's judgments are unsearchable, and that His ways are beyond man's ability to understand. In Ecclesiastes we also receive this insight: "and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, 'I know,' he cannot discover." (Ecclesiastes 8:17). With these teachings in mind, we know that man will never be able to understand all that God does.

The Scriptures do, however, provide some insights into the ways of God. For example, it is clear throughout the Bible that God punishes sin. It is also clear that God limits the actions taken by all men, and He also limits the actions taken by Satan (Job 1:6-2:8). However, there are times when God allows suffering to affect the lives of His people through evil that is perpetrated by others, or through evil that is perpetrated directly by Satan himself.

When we as believers are caught up in events brought about by the evil doing of others, and we suffer unjustly, we are enduring a share in the sufferings of Christ, who also suffered unjustly as a result of the wrongdoing of others. His sufferings happened according to the predetermined plan, purpose and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23), as do ours.

When we consider our own sufferings, let us recall once again Jesus' teaching in Matthew 10:29-31, where He revealed that God is intimately familiar with every detail of His creation, even down to the number of hairs on our head. Nothing, not even an event as small as the death of a sparrow, happens in God's creation apart from His knowledge and His sovereign will.

For everyone who has been called to faith in Christ, God has ordained that the unjust sufferings which He has allowed to affect our lives will be for us a share in Christ's sufferings, whether these sufferings are brought about directly by Satan himself or through the actions of men. These sufferings have been allowed to touch our lives by our sovereign God, because as He has also ordained, it will be through our sharing in the sufferings of His Son that we will realize a share in His eternal glory (Romans 8:17-18, Philippians 1:29, others). Unbelievers may also suffer as a

result of the evil doing of others, but unlike the believer, they have been granted no share in Christ's sufferings and no share in His eternal glory.

The Sovereignty of God in the Salvation of Men

The Scriptures provide abundant evidence of the sovereignty of God in the salvation of men, teaching us that God Himself determines who will come to faith in His Son Jesus Christ. In other words, God chooses those who will receive His mercy and be saved, and God also decides who will not receive His mercy and will therefore be lost. As we have seen previously, Romans 9:6-24 is one passage that teaches clearly on this subject. In particular, Paul spoke of God's sovereign choice concerning the salvation of men beginning in verse 16:

So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth." So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" 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? (Romans 9:16-21, emphasis added)

Paul taught in this passage that salvation through faith in Jesus Christ does not depend upon man's own will or decision to come to Christ while he is still dead in his sins, or upon any effort of his own, but solely upon God's sovereign decision as to whether He will show mercy to him. And as we have also seen previously, all who do come to faith in Christ are called by God, and at the point of this effectual calling an individual is regenerated; his conversion has occurred. As a result of his calling and conversion, he believes in Christ and has a desire to follow Him. And from that time on, there will be no turning back; God Himself will see to it.

Just as God controls the thoughts and intents of even the rulers of the earth, so also in the lives His elect, those to whom He has decided to show mercy by calling them to faith in His Son Jesus Christ, we see God prevailing against their own wills to bring them to faith in Christ, ***making*** them willing to do His will.

The Apostle Paul, who was known as Saul before his conversion, was given an understanding of the sovereignty of God in the salvation of men through the working of God in his own life. Saul's conversion on the Damascus road stands as an example of God prevailing against man's will, according to His own sovereign will and decision.

The account of Saul's conversion is recorded in Acts 9, Acts 22, and again in Acts 26. By studying these passages, we can see that Saul was clearly unregenerate and hostile toward the Gospel message. He was actively threatening the Lord's disciples and endeavoring to imprison them for their faith, right up until the moment in time when a light from Heaven flashed around him, and he was confronted by Jesus Christ Himself, as we read in Acts 9: "and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." (Acts 9:4-5)

In verse 5, Saul replied acknowledging that whoever had just intervened in his life was indeed Lord. At this point, Saul's conversion had occurred, and his conversion had occurred contrary to his own will up to that point. He was prevailed upon by God, and his own will to continue to breathe out "threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1) was abruptly interrupted and forever turned in exactly the opposite direction.

Saul had received mercy from God. His own will had been forcefully overcome, and the destructive path that he had chosen for himself was forever changed, according to the will, plan and purpose of our sovereign God.

God had made the decision before the world was created to bring Saul to faith, and in His time, He accomplished what He had decided to do in his life. And so it is with all of us who come to faith in Christ (Ephesians 1:4-5).

Again in the Book of Acts, we read of God's sovereign choice in the salvation of man. Beginning in Acts 13:44, we read that Paul and Barnabas addressed a crowd in Antioch which included both Jews and Gentiles. When the Jews saw the large crowds that had gathered to hear what they had to say, they became jealous and spoke against the Gospel message.

In response, Paul and Barnabas answered their Jewish opponents saying that it was their responsibility to bring the Gospel to them first. But since they had

rejected the message, they would now bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. Then they quoted from Isaiah 49:6 in the presence of everyone, saying that God had commanded them to be a light to the Gentiles, and to proclaim His salvation to the ends of the earth.

After this proclamation we read: “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). Who were those who believed the Gospel message? It was those who were **appointed** by our sovereign God to eternal life who believed the Gospel message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul taught in Romans 9:6-24 about God’s sovereign choice of those individuals who will receive His mercy, in that He has decided to call them to faith in His Son. And in contrast to those who receive God’s mercy, Paul taught that God chose to harden all the rest. The Apostle Peter also taught about God’s sovereign choice in the eternal destinies of men when he wrote:

“...they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, **and to this doom they were also appointed.**

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:8-9, emphasis added).

Peter taught that those who stumble do so because they disobey the word of God, and then he revealed that they had been **appointed** to this doom. In contrast to those who have been appointed to doom, Peter described those whom God has chosen and called out of darkness, as “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.”

Peter taught in this passage that some were chosen by God and appointed to come to faith in Christ (consider also Acts 13:48), but all the rest were appointed for disobedience and doom. The choice for both groups has been made by our sovereign God.

The Sovereignty of God in the Lives of His People

We have seen from Proverbs 21:1 that God controls the intents and actions of men, even the rulers of the earth. We have considered a few examples from the Scriptures, as God intervened in the lives of Pharaoh, Sennacherib and Sihon to

accomplish His sovereign purpose through them. These men were kings of the ancient world whom God hardened against His will so that He might display His power in prevailing against them.

Just as God intervenes in the lives of unbelievers in order to accomplish His plan and purpose, He also works in the lives of His people in order to accomplish His sovereign plan and purpose. His purpose for our lives always includes conforming us to the likeness of His Son Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29), and it also includes a particular place of service that He has ordained for each of us individually.

Paul exhorted us in Philippians: “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; ***for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.***” (Philippians 2:12-13, emphasis added).

When Paul exhorted us to continue to “work out” our salvation in a reverential fear of God, he was not implying that our salvation is in any way earned by works that we do. Because as we recall once again from Ephesians 2, Paul taught: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Rather, the message from Philippians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:10 is that each of us as believers was created in Christ Jesus to do good works, and God Himself has decided in advance just what those good works and places of service will be in each of our lives individually. As God fulfills His plan for each of us, He works in our lives to motivate us “to will and to work for His good pleasure”.

According to Philippians 2:13, God is working in our lives ***to make us willing, and to indeed make us act*** in accordance with His plan and purpose for each of us individually, as it fits into His sovereign will, plan and purpose for His creation as a whole. The good works that we will do in His service, which God has prepared beforehand for each of us, will bear fruit to His glory.

The good works which God has ordained for each of us always include obedience to His word as revealed in the Scriptures, and obedience to His directive when the time comes that He reveals to us some special work or place of service

that He has assigned for us. These special works, tasks, or places of service will most likely be consistent with a spiritual gift that He has given to us in order to edify the body of Christ (Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:7-11). And as we have seen before, preparation for a special work or task that God has assigned for us may take years, or even decades, as is evident from the lives and experiences of both Joseph and Moses as recorded in the Scriptures.

Believers who are young in the faith and have no idea if God has any special work for them to do or not should not be too concerned about these things. God will reveal to all of us in His time what gifts He has given to us, and how we are to serve Him. Instead, those who are young in the faith should focus their efforts as Peter taught when he said: “Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.” (1 Peter 2:1-3).

Teaching along these same lines in Romans 12:1-2, Paul wrote that we should offer ourselves as a “living and holy sacrifice” to God. Practically speaking, this means that we are to yield ourselves in obedience to all that we know God requires of us.

Paul then continued in this passage, teaching that we should no longer be conformed to the ways of the world and the thinking of unregenerate men, but we should be “transformed” by renewing our minds. This transformation is a process that moves forward as we learn more of the word of God through our study of the Bible, and as we are obedient to what we have learned. Through this process of transformation, we grow in our faith, and we will be able to understand what God’s will is.

God’s will is revealed to all believers through His word, and His will for each of us individually is revealed as the events and circumstances of our lives unfold. And all of the events and circumstances in each of our lives have been ordained for us by our sovereign God.

Abstaining from evil and renewing our minds by being actively involved in the study of God’s word is something that all of us as believers should be endeavoring to do throughout our lives, but we should also understand that the time will come when we are no longer “newborn babies”, as Peter said. In God’s time we will all be called upon to exercise our spiritual gifts for the benefit of the body of Christ, serving God in the place and capacity that He has assigned for us.

A Lesson from the Life of Jonah

God not only prevails over the wills of His elect in bringing them to faith in Christ, as we saw demonstrated in the conversion of the Apostle Paul, but He will also prevail over the will of one of His own people in order to accomplish a particular task that He is determined to accomplish through them. God had chosen the prophet Jonah for just such a task. In the opening verses of the Book of Jonah, we read:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.” But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. (Jonah 1:1-3)

God had a specific task that He wanted Jonah to accomplish, which was to go through the city of Nineveh and preach that His judgment was coming upon them because of their wickedness, unless the people repented. Nineveh was a large city in Assyria, which was a Gentile nation and an enemy of Israel. Jonah did not want to go there as the Lord had commanded him, because he knew that God was “a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity” (Jonah 4:2). And therefore he was afraid that the Ninevites would indeed repent of their wickedness, and that God would then relent from sending the calamity of His judgment upon them.

Jonah did not want to see Israel’s Gentile enemies receive God’s mercy, but he wanted to see His judgment fall upon them. So he rebelled against God’s command to go to Nineveh, and he actually headed in the opposite direction.

Jonah headed toward Tarshish, an ancient city believed to be in what is today Spain, which would have been one of the most remote locations in the known world at that time. He must have thought that by running away in the opposite direction to the furthest place he knew about that he could escape the command of the Lord to do what would be for him a very undesirable and distasteful task. Jonah probably reasoned that if he did not go as he was told, the Ninevites would continue in their wickedness, resulting in God’s judgment falling upon them, which was exactly what he wanted to see.

The problem with Jonah's plan was that his sovereign God was determined to use him for this task, and of course He knew exactly how much pressure to apply and how to apply it in order to force Jonah to comply with His will. God intervened in the life of Jonah to prevail upon him and to force Jonah's will into compliance with His own will, *to make Jonah will and act in order to fulfill His plan and purpose*. (Again consider Philippians 2:13).

God could have chosen someone else to preach to the Ninevites, but He did not. He was determined to use Jonah for this task, which became a very big problem for Jonah, and one that would be resolved in no other way except for him to obey God and do as he was commanded.

As Jonah was sailing to Tarshish, going in the opposite direction that God had told him to go, the Lord sent a storm that threatened the safety of the ship and all who were aboard. The men on the ship, who were apparently Gentiles from various nations, cast lots to see who was responsible for the calamity they were facing, and the lot fell to Jonah. Then they questioned Jonah about the matter, and he answered them saying: "... 'I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.' Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, 'How could you do this?' For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them." (Jonah 1:9-10).

Jonah then told the men to throw him overboard, and the sea would become calm again. So great was his disdain for the task that God had given to him that he would rather drown in the sea than have to do as God had commanded him.

At first the men did not want to throw Jonah into the sea, but the storm became worse, and they had to save themselves and the ship. After they threw him overboard, the sea became calm again. At this point we read: "Then the men feared the Lord greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights." (Jonah 1:16-17).

The great fish that swallowed Jonah was the pressure that God applied to make Jonah willing to do what He wanted him to do. At this point we as God's people might wonder what form the "great fish" might take in our own lives if we decided to embark on a course that would take us in the opposite direction from obedience to the word of God. Is there any doubt that in the end, obedience to God would prove to be much better than the belly of that fish? Jonah found out that

obedience to God was by far a better thing, and this is one of the lessons here for all of us as God's people.

From the belly of the great fish Jonah cried out to God for deliverance, after which God commanded the fish to vomit Jonah out onto dry land. Then we see from Jonah 3:1-3 that God commanded Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh and preach the message He gave to him. This time Jonah obeyed the Lord, and he went to Nineveh to proclaim God's message to them. As distasteful as the task was to him, Jonah was made to see that it was far better than the belly of the great fish.

As it turned out, the Ninevites did repent when they heard Jonah's preaching, and God did relent from sending the judgment that He had planned for them. We might think that Jonah should have felt honored to have been used by the Lord in such a way, but Jonah was angry that he had been used as an instrument of God's mercy shown to one of Israel's Gentile enemies (Jonah 4:1-4). However, the decision to show mercy to Jew or to Gentile belongs to our sovereign God alone, as Paul taught in Romans 9, and as we see from several other passages of Scripture.

In Conclusion

Discussions of the sovereignty of God in the lives of men, and looking into the Scriptures to see how God actually hardens some men against Himself as part of His overall will and plan for His creation, will generate questions regarding just to what extent man possesses a free will. To be sure, no man has ever prevailed against God. God's sovereign plan for His creation goes forward exactly as He intends, and that sovereign plan centers on the life, death, and resurrection from the dead of His Son Jesus Christ.

Some refer to God's allowing suffering and destruction to occur in the lives of men as His "permissive" will, meaning that God knew these things would happen, and He did not stop them from happening, though He could have. However as we have seen from the Scriptures before, when suffering and tragedy come into our lives as believers, God's word promises that these things are working together along with everything that comes into our lives for our ultimate good and for our future glory together with Christ in Heaven (Romans 8:28). For believers, and only for believers, the troubles and sufferings that we endure, all of which have been allowed to affect our lives by our sovereign God, will all be made

to achieve for us an eternal measure of glory that far outweighs the grief and burden of the troubles themselves (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

When we consider the idea of man's free will and just to what extent man has a free will, let us consider the many Scripture passages that clearly demonstrate that our sovereign God does indeed intervene in the lives of men to make them conform to His overall plan and purpose for His creation. Some He hardens against Himself (Romans 9:18). Paul spoke of these individuals as "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (Romans 9:22). We have seen examples from the Old Testament in the lives of several kings of the ancient world where God hardened these kings, making them oppose His will, so that He could demonstrate His power and His Name would become known by prevailing against them.

In contrast to those whom God hardens against Himself, He chooses to show mercy to others. Paul spoke of those who receive God's mercy as "vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles." (Romans 9:23-24).

Also in the lives of those of us who receive His mercy, God may at times bring about circumstances that will force us, against our own wills, to comply with His sovereign will. We have seen this clearly demonstrated in the life of Jonah. Everything that is recorded in the Scriptures is recorded to reveal to us as God's people something of the ways of our sovereign God, including the ways that He works in the lives of His servants to accomplish His will through them.

Our God is sovereign over all of His creation, and He has a plan for every individual, whether they are among those of us who receive His mercy, or they are among those whom He hardens. We have seen from the Scriptures that God motivates men, even forcefully overcoming their own wills, in order to bring them, their thoughts, their intents, and their actions into conformity with His own sovereign will, plan and purpose.