

God's Sovereignty & Human Freedom

Student Outline

Crossroads Theological Institute

Crossroads Church, Morgantown

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Introduction to Course Topic and Preliminaries

- I. Importance of the topic.
- II. Bathrooms, snacks, book, etc.

Part 1: Definitions and Options

I. Introduction

- A. Understanding the Language: Why Definitions Matter
- B. Surveying the Landscape: Understanding the Positions

II. Definitions

- A. Sovereignty: God's Power and Authority over all his creation

B. Providence: The power of God in upholding his whole creation through his fatherly hand.

- God's sovereignty at work.

C. Free Will: The Ability to Voluntarily Choose or Decide between possible courses of action

III.Views

A. Deism

1. A rationalistic approach to God in which God creates the world and allows it to run its course without any intervention or direct control. Not explicitly Christian.

2. Arguments: Classical Arguments for God's Existence and Transcendence

- Romans 1:19-20
- Romans 2:14-15

3. Followers: Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Voltaire

B. Open Theism/Process Theology

1. An approach to God that prizes human freedom and believes that God does not have control or knowledge over certain future events due to their

“open” nature.

2. Arguments: God Changing His Mind, God's Expressions of Regret and Surprise

- Exodus 32:14
- Jonah 3:10
- Jeremiah 3:6-7
- Genesis 6:5-6

3. Followers: Socinus, Clark Pinnock, John Mark Comer

C. Libertarian Free Will

1. The belief that Humans have moral and metaphysical autonomy and operate independently without causation, so God knows the future but does not determine the future.
2. Arguments: Free Will and Responsibility/Moral Responsibility, Against God's God's Will
 - Deuteronomy 30:11-19

- Revelation 3:20
- 1 Timothy 2:4
- 2 Peter 3:9

3. Followers: Jacob Arminius, John Wesley, Billy Graham.

D. Middle Knowledge/Molinism

1. A belief that seeks to find a compromise between divine sovereignty and human freedom by espousing God's use of "middle knowledge" to control future circumstances and contingencies while not violating human free will.
2. Arguments: God's Counterfactual Knowledge and Control of the Circumstances

- 1 Samuel 23:6-14
- John 15:22-24
- 1 Corinthians 10:13

3. Followers: Luis Molina, William Lane Craig, Alvin Plantinga

E. Compatibilism/Concurrence

1. The belief that God's sovereignty and human freedom are both true and compatible with one another, meaning that human choices are both free and God-ordained.

2. Arguments: God's Sovereignty through Free Will and over our Hearts

- Genesis 50:20
- Acts 2:23
- Exodus 7:3
- Exodus 8:15
- Romans 1:24-27

3. Followers: Augustine, John Calvin, John Piper

F. Determinism/Fatalism

1. The belief that everything is pre-determined, contra free will, as free will is incompatible with God's sovereignty.

2. Arguments: Argument from Causation, Humans as Instruments in God's Hand

- Isaiah 10:15
- Jeremiah 18:6
- Daniel 4:34-35

3. Followers: Baruch Spinoza, John Gill, John Nelson Darby

IV. Conclusion

A. Importance of Understanding Perspectives

B. Questions

Part 2: What Does the Bible Teach? A Biblical Theology of God's Sovereignty and Human Freedom

I. What is the Extent of God's Sovereignty?

A. God *Created* Everything That Was Made (Genesis 1:1, Colossians 1:16)

B. God *Preserves* the Existence and Nature of Everything He Created (Neh. 9:6, Hebrews 1:2-3, Colossians 1:17)

C. God *Cooperates* with All He Has Created In Every Action Through *Concurrence*

1. Nature (Psalm 104:14, Ps 135:6-7, 103:14, Job 38:32)
2. Animals (Ps. 104:27-29, Matt 10:29, Matt 6:26)
3. Random Events (Prov 16:33, Ruth 2:3, 3:8)
4. Nations and Kings (Job 12:23, Ps. 22:28, Dan. 4:34-35, 2:21)
5. Human Beings (Ps. 139:16, Acts 17:28, Jer. 10:23, Prov 16:1, 9, 21:1)
6. Life and Death (Deut. 32:39)
7. Natural Disasters (Isaiah 45:5-8)
8. The Curse (Romans 8:20-23)

D. God *Governs* All Things to Fulfill His Will and Their Purpose Without Committing or Overlooking Evil (Eph. 1:11, Dan 4:34-35, Psalm 115:2-3, Romans 8:28)

1. God is wholly Good and does only Good (James 1:13, Deut. 32:4, Rev. 15:34, Gen 1:31)

2. God is Sovereign Over Evil Without Committing or Overlooking Evil

- a) God controls light and darkness (Isaiah 45:7), but God is light (1 John 1:5-7)
- b) God controls good and evil, but God does not take pleasure in evil (Isaiah 45:7, Psalm 5:4)
- c) Divine Inscrutability and Mystery (Isaiah 40:28, Rom 11:33-34)

3. Case Studies of Concurrence in God's Sovereignty Over Evil

- a) Joseph – “What You Intended for Evil, God Intended for Good” (Gen 45:4-8, Gen. 50:20)
- b) Assyria – “Shall The Ax Boast Against the One Who Swings It?” (Isaiah 10:5, 7, 12, 15)
- c) Jesus - “gathered together against Jesus to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place” (Acts 2:23, 4:23-31)

E. Response: Praise, Assurance, and Motivation (Romans 11:33-36)

II. What Is The Extent of Human Freedom?

A. Humans Are Created in God's Image as Moral Beings (Genesis 1:27, 2:16-17)

1. Human Beings Freely Make Decisions in Accordance with Their Nature and Desires Without Coercion (John 8:34, James 1:14)

a) Free Will Is Bound By Nature (Gen. 1:27, Luke 6:45)

b) Free Will is Bound By Desire (John 8:34)

2. Human Beings Are Responsible for Their Decisions and Held Morally Accountable by God (Gen. 2:16-17, Romans 14:12, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Deut. 30:19, Gal. 6:7, Ecc. 12:14)

3. Human Beings Cooperate with God's Sovereign Will to Bring about His Good Desire in Every Action (Gen. 50:20, Prov. 16:9, Isaiah 46:10, Acts 2:23, 1 Cor. 15:10)

a) Sovereignly Caused and Freely Chosen

B. Four States Of Human Freedom Throughout History

1. Before The Fall - Able to Sin, Able Not to Sin (Gen. 2:16-17)

2. After the Fall - Not Able Not To Sin (Romans 3:10-12, Romans 8:7-8, Ephesians 2:1-3, 4:17-24, Romans 14:23)

a) The Flesh Cannot Please God (Romans 8:7)

b) Functionally Capable, Morally Incapable

3. After Regeneration - Able Not To Sin (Ezekiel 36:26-27, 2 Cor. 5:17, Romans 6:14, 2 Cor. 3:18, Gal. 5:16-17).

4. After Glorification - Unable to Sin (1 John 3:2, 1 Cor 15:42-44)

III. Implications of God's Sovereignty and Human Freedom

A. God Is Completely In Charge and Completely Good (Romans 8:28)

B. Our Actions Have Real Consequences

C. Salvation is All of Grace (Ephesians 2:8-9)

D. Steel in the Backbone of Faith and Joy in the Heart in Suffering (Romans 8:18-23)

E. Confidence to Follow God's Moral Will in Courage and Leave the Results to Him in Faith (2 Samuel 10:12, John 19:11)

Part 3: Common Questions and Application of Concurrency

A. Does God change His mind in response to human choices?¹

Gen. 6:5-6, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶ And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart."

1 Sam. 15:11, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments."

2 Sam. 24:16, "And when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord relented from the calamity and said to the angel who was working destruction

¹ Help on this section from Ware, Bruce, *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith*, chapter 10 "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries Theologically: Is Open Theism Evangelical?", Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004.

among the people, 'It is enough; now stay your hand.'"

1. God cannot change (i.e. his mind) or have regret for his actions. (immutable).
(Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Isa. 46:8-11; Mal. 3:6; etc.)
2. God is sovereign over human choices (Prov. 21:1; Ps. 139:16; etc.).
3. God sovereignly ordains the follow-on actions taken and the choices of humans in response to his "regret" and to His warning of consequences (cf. Gen. 6:6; 1 Sam. 15:11, 35; 2 Sam. 24:16; etc.).
4. God uses anthropomorphic language all the time to describe His own will and actions, including those which describe God's withholding of some warned consequences of alternative human choices (Gen. 9:16; Ps. 34:15; Jer. 3:7; etc.).

B. Does God respond to prayer?

1. Prayer assumes God's sovereignty, as it expresses dependence on God in His sovereign control of ends and means. So, pray boldly.
2. Prayers prayed without submission to God's commands and created design are only answered in judgment, or else not at all. So, pray humbly. (James 4:2-3)

3. Prayers prayed without submission to God's sovereign purposes are presumptuous and often answered differently than asked. So, pray trustingly.
4. Prayers that are undergirded by morally upright and godly desires and submitted to God's sovereign will are the prayers that the Lord loves to supply, in answer, in His good timing. (Ps. 34:10; Ps. 84:11; Matt. 7:7-11; 1 Jn. 5:14; Lk. 22:42)
5. God works out His sovereign plan in answers to the faithful prayers of His redeemed people.

C. How does God's sovereignty work in salvation with our sharing the gospel, and believing in the gospel?

1. Theology
 1. God calls His redeemed people to act as ambassadors for God in His majesty to other people (Isa. 6:8; Acts. 9:15; Mt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; 2 Cor. 5:20).
 2. Saving repentant faith in Christ is a real act of the human will, even if some (like C.S. Lewis) claim to have been converted against their will (John 10:14-16, 27-29, etc.).

3. And, yet, God is entirely sovereign in salvation and conversion (Rom. 8:30, Rom. 9:15-18; Eph. 2:8-9; etc.).
4. Therefore, human will in salvation is real, but it is owing to the sovereign work of God in changing their desire (John 1:12-13; Acts 2:37-38; etc.)
5. But, the Bible says that it's the telling of God's Word that is the means that God uses to convert a person's desires compellingly to believe on Christ (Rom. 10:14-17; etc.).
6. So, we can say that God sovereignly ordains the ends (conversion and salvation) as well as the means (evangelism) to work His sovereign decree in bringing about the conversion of people whom God has planned [predestined] to save. So, our obedience in speaking the gospel is God's sovereign means for the Holy Spirit to effectively draw people to saving faith in Christ.

1. Implications (What does this do for us?)

- a. This should encourage us to go to people of every type, ethnicity, nationality, geography, and culture, calling people into Jesus' kingdom, knowing He will draw His elect through our proclamation (Luke 14:23).
- b. God's sovereignty in salvation should encourage us to share the gospel with a sense of creativity and urgency, but not panic or impatience.

- c. God's sovereignty in salvation gives confidence in sharing the gospel, but not in ourselves or in certain results (Mt. 28:18-19; Mt. 9:37-38).
- d. God's sovereignty in salvation sustains evangelism in the face of discouragement, and even propels us (1 Tim. 4:10; 2 Tim. 2:10; Acts 18:9-10).

D. How does God's sovereignty relate to our efforts in sanctification?

1. Concurrence is evident in our growth. God is sovereign, working even in our desires, and we work to cultivate and act from godly desires (Phil. 2:12-13; Gal. 2:20; 1 Cor. 15:10; Jude 20-25).
2. This means we rest in the assurance of the permanence and power of Christ and His promise to complete the work in us that the Holy Spirit himself began (Phil. 1:6).
3. This means we work hard, press on for the goal, and discipline our bodies for the purpose of godliness. "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning."² (Phil. 3:12; 1 Cor. 9:24-27; 1 Tim. 4:7, 10).
4. This means we seek God's help and strengthen ourselves with the promises, encouragements, and warnings that God's Word gives us, and through prayer to

² Willard, Dallas. Not an author we recommend on spiritual formation, generally, but a great quote, nonetheless!

persevere in faith, repentance, worship, fellowship, and obedience (Heb. 12:12-13; Eph. 5:10-11, 13).

E. Does God cause the evil choices of humans?³

1. God is sovereign. God is in control of all history and has a glorious plan and purpose for all things that cannot be thwarted by the sin of any creature (Isa. 45:7; Lam. 3:37-38; Amos 3:6; etc.).
2. God is Entirely and Perfectly Holy, Righteous, and Good.
 - a) So, all that God does is holy, righteous, and good. (Gen. 1; Deut. 32:4; Lam. 3:32-33; Ps. 18:30; James 1:16-17).
 - b) Being entirely holy, righteous, and good, God cannot sin, cause sin, or tempt anyone to sin (1 Jn. 1:5; James 1:13-14; 1 Tim. 6:15-16; etc.)
3. Sin is Distortion/Privation of Good (Isa. 5:20; Rom. 1:21-25; Rom. 3:23; Jn. 8:44).
4. Asymmetry. God, in His sovereignty, is related to the sin of creatures *asymmetrically*. God directly does the one (good) but allows sin and evil (privation/distortion), and is therefore neither the author of sin nor causes anyone to sin while still sovereign in His good plan and purpose.

³ Frame, John, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. Chapter 14, "The Problem of Evil." Kindle Edition.

5. Greater Good.⁴ God sovereignly allows sin for the purpose of the greater good of displaying to men and angels (Isa. 43:6-7; Ecc. 8:12; Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:11-12; etc.).

- a) Some evil, God allows, as a providential means of unexpected provision and help (Gen. 45:5, 7-8; 50:20).
- b) Some evil, God allows, as a form of judgment on the person doing the evil, as a further demonstration of their unbelief, a storing-up of guilt and judgement against them (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28; Rom. 2:5; 1 Sam. 2:25).
- c) Some evil, God allows, to point unbelievers to His the truths of the gospel, that they might repent and believe in Christ and be saved (Luke 13:1-5).
- d) Some evil experienced by others, God allows, as a form of correction for the sin of His people, that they might see their sin, confess, and walk in obedience (Heb. 12:11; 2 Cor. 4:16-18).
- e) Some evil, God allows, in order to shape Christians' character in dependence on God and in compassion and care for others, displaying His mercy that they have received (Eph. 1:3-10; 2 Cor. 1:3-4).

6. Implications:

- a) Trust the Mystery/Inscrutability of God (Rom. 11:33-36).

⁴ Some great stuff on "greater good theodicy" borrowed here from Welty, Greg, "The Problem of Evil," *The Gospel Coalition*, 2025, accessed May 12-16, 2025, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-problem-of-evil/> .

b) We have an objective accounting for the reality and source of evil and good in the world.

c) We can trust the justice of God.

d) We, as guilty sinners, can turn to the mercy of God in the atoning death of Jesus at the sinful hands of men.