

God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

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“Who art thou, O man, that repliest against God?” –

Romans ix. 10-24.

A serious and profitable discussion of this tremendous topic cannot be entered upon without recognizing first of all the limitations of our understanding and the silence of the Holy Spirit on vast aspects of the question. Indeed, we may take the whole glorious sweep of revealed truth concerning the person, the work, and the ways of God, and, while maintaining steadfastly the finality and absoluteness of what has certainly been revealed to us by God, borrow the words of Job and exclaim, “Lo, these are parts of his ways. How little a portion of him is heard.” We do not mean that there will be any revelation of God in eternity that will supersede, set on one side, or render invalid even the smallest detail of truth now revealed unto us, but we simply recognize that God is yet greater than it is possible for us to comprehend; now, we know in part only, but then we shall know even as also we are known (I Cor. xiii.).

It behoves us then to tread upon this sacred ground of the sphere of God's sovereignty, and the proper relation thereto of man's responsibility, with reverence, humility and faith, receiving meekly and thankfully what God has to say thereon, and neither adding to nor taking from the plain declarations of the Spirit speaking in the Word of God.

Let us therefore begin by imposing upon ourselves due caution and restraint, and a humble recognition of the limitations of our faculties and understanding. Let us not incur the devastating reproof which the Spirit lays upon prying curiosity and impious reasoning—“Who art thou, O man, that repliest against God?” Depend upon it, that unless you be possessed of a humble, pious mind, intending only to ascertain and to receive what God has made clear in His Word, you shall not want for materials in this discussion to fire you with indignation and rising wrath against the truth of God's sovereignty, for, whatever the implications may be, you must remember that God is God

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wherever man comes in. God is sovereign and sovereign means *sovereign*. “Let God be true and every man a liar.” Rather let man have no place at all, than that God's rule, God's honour, God's sway, be impaired or injured for one moment.

I

This introduces us to the first aspect of the question,—God's eternal reign. “The Lord is a great God and a great king above all gods. In his hand are the deep places of the earth; the strength of the hills is His also.” (Psalm xcv. 3 and 4). Let us begin here and we shall begin well.

What is meant by God being “Sovereign”? The simplest, plainest, directest definition is in that tremendous confession wrung by the judgments of God from the heathen heart of that

remarkable monarch, Nebuchadnezzar, and inscribed by the Spirit in Daniel iv. 34 and 35: "Him that liveth for ever and ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, what doest thou?"

Mark those words: "according to his will". To those who impiously and imprudently would enquire of God and demand of the Most High a reason for the mysterious and dark sides of His providence, the answer awaits "None can... say unto Him, what doest thou?" To the like purpose are the following:—

"He taketh away, who can hinder him? Who will say unto him, What doest thou?" (Job ix. 12).

"He is not a man, as I am, that I should answer him, and we should come together in judgment" (Job ix. 32).

"He giveth no account of his matters" (Job xxxiii. 13).

"Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? or thy work, He hath no hands?" (Isaiah xlv. 9).

"God's pleasure" is the rule of the Universe, whether in natural province or in the scheme of salvation by grace—as witness the following scriptures:—

"Our God is in the heavens. He hath done whatsoever he pleased" (Psalm cxv. 3).

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"Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places" (Psalm cxxxv. 6).

"I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Isaiah xlvi. 9 and 10).

"Thou has created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created" (Revelation iv. 11).

Coming more particularly to the fact that God's sovereign will and pleasure is *the determining factor* in salvation, we have an almost bewildering profusion of scriptural statements.

In Isaiah liii. we are told what is the origin, nature, purpose and result of Christ's work. Particularly the last three verses proclaim with amazing clearness how God's sovereign will and pleasure were fulfilled in Christ's sufferings, death and resurrection. The beginning and end of verse 10 declare that both the origin and result of Christ's sufferings are "the pleasure of the Lord". "It pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief"—that speaks of Christ's humiliation unto death as being according to the pleasure of the Lord "when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin"—that speaks of the purpose for which Christ died, namely to make an atonement for sin, which atonement, as it is according to God's pleasure,

is bound to be accepted by him. As Calvin so pointedly writes: "If Christ died not by the will of God, then where is our redemption?" "He shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand"—in other words, Christ shall not die in vain; "he shall see his seed" even all that host of elect souls whom the Father covenanted with the Son to redeem. Christ names the terms of this eternal covenant in John xvii., where, in anticipation of His death about to be accomplished, He demands in holy and righteous confidence, the fulfilment of the Father's part—"I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self, with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" "Father, the hour is come, glorify thy Son that thy Son also may glorify thee: As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life *to as many as thou hast given him.*" Here He speaks of that elect seed of promise which Isaiah prophesied that He should "see".

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Verses 11 and 12 of Isaiah liii. enlarge upon the scope and terms of the eternal covenant of redemption. They speak of the certainty of the result of Christ's dying, and they commence with the tremendous words, "He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall *be satisfied.*"

What meaneth this, that Christ shall be "satisfied when He looks back upon the result of His death as enumerated in the host of saved souls? Ask the question of those who sentimentally contend that God and Christ are "breaking their hearts" over multitudes of sinners going down to perdition whom they would save if they could, but they cannot, because they left out of account in the scheme of salvation, the two vital factors upon which the whole plan was contingent—the "sovereign" will of man, and adequate provision for getting the gospel preached to every creature.

O, modern evangelicalism! What hast thou to answer for! What miserable, small, and God-dishonouring views dost thou entertain of that salvation which was prepared in eternity, and for the display of which, as it called into activity and brought into view all the marvellous attributes of the Triune God, the earth, and all therein, and all its events have their being! Christ was verily fore-ordained before the foundation of the earth to be the Lamb slain (I Peter i. 20). The conception of God in Christ, stooping in order to honour His own glorious name, suffering in order to magnify his own incomparable justice, dying in shame and rising in glory in order to bring into glorious display His own matchless grace and wisdom, had, therefore, priority over the creation of the world and of those who are therein. In the salvation of the Church (the whole company of the redeemed from every age) the manifold wisdom of God is called into display and admiration before the assembled universe (Ephesians iii. 10 and 11).

Can it be suggested for one moment that so immense a sacrifice could be rendered by the Son, and yet that the efficacy, of the work should be suspended upon the corrupt, vacillating wills of fallen men? "He shall be satisfied" rings out the answer of eternal truth. The result of Christ's dying were never for a moment in doubt. "For the joy that was set before Him, Christ endured the Cross, despising the shame and is set down at the right hand of God"—"From henceforth expecting until His enemies be made His footstool" (Heb. xii 2, and x. 12 and 13).

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Who then will contend, on behalf of wicked men, that God does not have an "eternal covenant" with Christ His Son, "ordered in all things and sure" for the salvation of an elect host from the midst of a rebellious world? Let us hearken to what the Son saith concerning this covenant of life which He sealed with His blood (Heb. xiii. 20).

"All that the Father *giveth* me shall come to me... I came not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me, and this is the will of him that sent me, that of all *which he hath given* me I should lose nothing (John vi. 37-40).

"Therefore doth my Father love me because I lay down my life... No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself" (John x. 17-18).

"Ye believe not because ye are not of my sheep.... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life.... I lay down my life for the sheep" (John x. 26-28, xv.).

From all the foregoing, it is plain that God reigns. "There is no wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel against the Lord" (Prov. xxi. 30). His will is the rule of the universe; His plan and purpose roll on, unhindered, to the appointed end, which is His own eternal praise and glory. Who can explore the inner recesses of His wisdom? He must be wiser than God who would outwit Him, and stronger than He in order to defeat His purposes. "The weakness of God is stronger than men, and the foolishness of God is wiser than men" (1 Cor. i.). As in natural providence, so in salvation, God reigns. His choice, before the foundation of the world determines our salvation (Eph. i. 4; John xv. 16). He saves whom He will (John v. 21). "It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy" (Rom. ix. 16).

The first rebellion against God's rule was that of the fallen angelic host with Satan at their head. Their first counsel after their fall was the discomfiture of God through the works of His hands, and so they wrought the ruin of man who was made in the image of God. But there is "no wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel against the Lord". God's purpose was wider than, deeper than, greater than their most deadly purpose, and out of the materials of man's shameful fall, God fashioned a work and sought an occasion of grace, smote His enemies with their own weapons ; overcame their strength through weakness;

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defeated their pride through humility; and built a new spiritual creation far more glorious than the first.

Note, in brief, the following scriptures: Romans xi. 33; Isaiah xliii. 13; Proverbs xvi. 1, 9; xix. 21 xx. 24; xxi. 1.

II

The question remains, How does all this consist with what we know, and to which our conscience bears witness, regarding the responsibility of man?

First of all, What is the "responsibility of man"? The easiest definition will no doubt be that man is fully accountable for all his thoughts, words and actions ; that he is a moral creature

capable of moral judgment, and that only as he is this, can materials be found in his actions for a just and righteous judgment before the throne of God.

There is a way of disposing of this question out of hand by a simple appeal to the well founded doctrine of "philosophical necessity". In his book *The Freedom of the Will*, Jonathan Edwards has settled for all time this question.

It is not our purpose, however, to embark upon abstruse dissertations where men of plain and simple mould will find difficulty in following, but to dispose of the question entirely by appeal to scriptural statement and illustration. If it can be safely and plainly established from scripture that even as God directs and disposes the hearts of men along certain channels, they are none the less accountable for all their doings, all argument will be settled for the pious mind who will accept the truth even while acknowledging with humility the profound mystery of God's will. As for the rest—for those who would be wiser than God and more just than God,—we are under no obligation to give them a reason much less to give them satisfaction.

The blackest crime of which this world was guilty, was the death of the Son of God. But observe the secret providence of God exerted in all the dispositions of that tremendous event. Isaiah says "It pleased the Lord to bruise Him." Christ says "No man taketh my life from me, but I lay it down of myself." In the garden He prayed "Thy will be done." Yet the devil was there, in malignant fury, to make away with His great foe. "This is your hour and the power of darkness." "The devil put it into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus." Judas was there,

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actuated by the love of gold to betray the Son or Man "as it was written of him". The chief priests and rulers were there, actuated by envy and jealousy. "Pilate knew that for envy they had delivered Him." Yet speaking of the accomplished event, Peter declares that Christ was "delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" (Acts ii. 23) and the Church in prayer acclaims that against Jesus, Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and the people of Israel were gathered together, but only "to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done" (Acts iv.). What does it mean? Only that God employed all these wicked instruments to bring to pass his own "pleasure" concerning the death of His Son as a sacrifice for sin. The devil was motivated by hate, Judas by cupidity, and the Israelites by envy, and were fully accountable and responsible to God for all that they did—nevertheless even in their guilt and wickedness and murder and lies, they but accomplished the design and will of God. Ask not for an explanation of how this sovereignty of God consisteth with the responsibility of man. There is the fact of it. Who can challenge it? The humble will receive it, and praise the Most High for His matchless wisdom and perfect work in making even the wrath of man to praise Him, yet withal retaining His perfect integrity—most righteous, most pure, most holy. "I cannot understand!" cries this one or that. But God would not be God, and man would not be man if the creature could climb to the Creator's eminence and see with His eyes and understand with His wisdom. It is enough that God has declared the fact, and who art thou, O man, that repliest against God?

Consider the case of Pharaoh. "Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout the whole earth" says God to this heathen monarch (Romans ix. 17).

Ere ever God's judgments fell upon Pharaoh, God said to Moses "I will harden his heart that he shall not let the people go" (Exodus iv. 21). Those who glibly cut the Gordian knot by declaring "God did not harden Pharaoh's heart until Pharaoh first hardened his own" always overlook this reference in Exodus iv. of what God said ere ever Moses went to Pharaoh with the first plague. The whole argument of Paul in Romans ix. would be meaningless if God had nothing to do

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with the hardening of the king's heart. To what purpose would have been the remonstrance of the objector, "Why doth he yet find fault, for who hath resisted his will?" if Pharaoh's heart had merely been hardened by his own obstinacy without the intervention of God? How easy it would have been for Paul to dispose of the objector by the simple declaration, "But Pharaoh hardened his own heart to begin with, when God really wanted to soften it!"

Instead, he acknowledges the mystery and repels the impiety, "Who art thou, that repliest against God?" God sought an occasion to pour His judgments upon a wicked people. Causeless His judgments did not come. He hardened His enemy's heart, yet the enemy remained fully accountable and deserving of the judgments which fell. Pharaoh was conscious of no compulsion. He boasted of his freedom of action and hurled insults in the face of the God of Israel. God was sovereign, yet Pharaoh was fully "responsible".

The time would fail to tell of other plain examples of the sovereign disposing of men's hearts even to the minutest details. Wicked Absalom chose the evil (to him) counsel of Hushai because "the Lord had appointed to defeat the counsel of Ahitophel to the intent that he might bring evil upon Absalom" (2 Sam. xvii. 14).

Rehoboam hearkened not unto the people "for the cause was from God, that he might perform his word" in rending the ten tribes from the house of David (2 Chron. x. 15). God was performing His sovereign will in leaving Rehoboam to embrace advice which was against his own interests, yet, like Absalom, he was aware of no compulsion and acted with a complete sense of responsibility.

God forged the Assyrian nation as a weapon in His hand for executing His anger and indignation upon wicked peoples. He gave the Assyrian a charge to take the spoil and the prey, "howbeit, he (the Assyrian) thought not so". The Assyrian was motivated only by his destructive cruelty and desire for power and spoil; he boasted even when doing the will of God in the chastisement of the nations, that his own power and might were the determining factors, and therefore, after having exhausted the uses of the weapon which He (the Lord) had forged, God turned His hand against the Assyrian and punished the fruit of his stout heart, and the glory of his high looks

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(Isaiah x. 5-19). Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith?

The Chaldeans who swooped upon Job's goods were actuated by the desire for plunder. The devil who drove them on was motivated by ungovernable pride and envy. Job saw beyond both of them, and said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the

Lord." God was sovereign—yet the Chaldeans remained accountable and the devil was still blameworthy, despite the fact that their worst fury only accomplished the secret decree of God.

III

In the realm of grace, the problem is somewhat different. Predestination to life—God's eternal decree of election; the choosing of some from the family of Adam to eternal life to the eternal exclusion of the remainder—is sometimes represented by opponents of the doctrine as a monstrous device for keeping souls out of heaven who are striving to get there, and the bringing into heaven of hellish individuals who indulge their lusts and live as they please, knowing that all will be well with them in the end? Nothing could be more fanciful or more utterly untrue. Half the objection to the doctrine of election is founded on the assumption that natural, depraved, sinful man, dead in trespasses and in sins, is capable of holy motives, and an honest search after God. The truth is, that until the Spirit of God breathe upon the dead soul, man is incapable of a gracious act, a gracious thought, or a gracious motive. "There is none that seeketh after God, there is none that doeth good; there is no fear of God before their eyes" (Romans iii.). Man is universally depraved and ungodly. His greatest crime is that he does not seek after the true God, even where the restraints of providence have preserved him from the grosser corruptions of human nature. To this effect are the words of Christ, "No man can come to me except the Father draw him" (John vi. 44). Again, "No man can come unto me except it were given unto him of my Father" (John vi. 65).

The heart of the sons of men is wholly set in them to do evil (Ecc. viii. 11). Every imagination of the thoughts of men's hearts is only evil continually (Gen. vi. 5). Human nature has not improved since the Flood. As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be in the days of the Son of Man. Who can bring

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a clean thing out of an unclean? That which is born of the flesh is flesh.

Does man's incapacity for good make him any the less blameworthy for his obdurate wickedness? Does not the incorrigible nature of his crime rather aggravate his guilt? Does the fact that God is incapable of doing evil make His goodness less praiseworthy? Does it not rather entitle Him to the greater praise and glory that sin has not, and cannot have, a place in His being?

"God cannot be tempted with evil" says James (chapter i. 13).

Man's unbelief is characterized as a blacker, more heinous crime in that it springs from an obdurate, unyielding heart, so dead and inured to sin, as to be incapable of elevating itself from the corruption and selfishness which it loves and in which it expatiates.

From whence then cometh salvation? Certainly not from the black heart of man. No hope of an evangelical response to the preaching of free grace can be expected from man as he is by nature. Only as the Spirit intervenes, quickening the dead soul, reducing it to repentance, and turning it from its corruptions to the living God and to a lively faith in Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and to His blood which cleanses from all sin, can the soul be saved. So utterly

beyond the faculties of fallen man is this great work, that it is represented in the New Testament as comparable with the first work of creation—"God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. iv. 6)—and to the translation of Enoch and Elijah, from earth to Heaven, "He hath translated us from the power of darkness, into the Kingdom of His dear Son" (Col. i.).

You will ask, "What then is the use of preaching the Gospel, if dead souls can neither hear nor respond?" Lazarus stank in the grave where he had lain for three days. At Christ's command, "Come forth!" he that was dead came forth, not because he in his death had power to hear or to respond, but because the voice of the Creator carried creative power to the dead, rotting body. So with the salvation of the soul. The Gospel call is sounded over the graves of the spiritually dead, and those to whom the word comes, not in word only, but in power hearing, live. "The hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live" (John v. 25).

Those who "live" do not abandon themselves to profligacy. Their one complaint is that they cannot, because of the warfare of the old man against the new, "live as they please", for to them, "to live as they please" means to live in perfect holiness" conformed in all things to the image of the Son" which also they are predestinated (Romans viii. 29, 30).

Those who do not believe, are accountable for their unbelief, inasmuch as it is due to their own darkness and sin which they love and from which they desire not to be separated. Those who believe ascribe all the praise and glory to the free, sovereign, electing love of God, and should any inquire why they should have been chosen from among men for this blessed grace, we leave them with McChayne's wondering exclamation, "Why me, Lord? Why me? "Eternal, unchanging, covenant love is the explanation of the one; just, righteous, holy judgment is the explanation of the other. Should anyone repine against this and demand a reckoning with God, they are left with the Spirit's reproof, Who art thou, O man, that repliest against God?

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