

Sovereignty of God

(by Bob Pulliam)

Although you will not find the word sovereign in most translations of the New Testament, there are a couple of Greek words in the original that associate it with God. The concept of sovereignty is that of the omnipotence (all-powerful) of God. The discussion of this is important at this point, because much has been written and said on the subject as it relates to the salvation of mankind. Here is the problem in a nutshell, looking at two very common approaches to the sovereignty of God:

God is sovereign (all-powerful), therefore all choices have been predetermined and taken by his immutable will. If not, then He ceases to be God.

God's sovereignty does not depend on His removing choice from His creatures. His power is still exercised to the degree His will chooses, and the creature must choose his course.

For some, these may not seem to be that different. But if you will look more closely, you will find that in the first approach, mankind has no choice. All has been predetermined by God. In the second, God has elected to give mankind free will, and exercise His power in accordance with that choice.

All kinds of deep philosophical question and answer can be generated on this (as well as the mundane "if God can do all things, can He make a rock larger than He is capable of moving"). We could ponder the ancient question of the place of prayer. If the first approach be true, then God has already determined an outcome irrespective of any request we might make. Why pray? And then there is that deep area of thought where we wonder about the lost. If God predetermined who the lost and saved are, is anyone really responsible for their own actions? Did Hitler do terrible things, or did God preprogram the events by His sovereign power?

But on what basis would such questions be answered? The problem here is not whether or not God is sovereign. The problem is the dimension in which His sovereignty truly exists. God has not directly addressed this in His revelation. Knowledge of that information was not necessary for us to be saved. The knowledge we have of God's sovereignty will not be based on God expressly defining it for us. Instead, we will have to understand it by what the Bible demands of each individual, and what it reveals about each of us concerning salvation. If the Bible teaches that we have no choice, then such helps us define the approach to understanding God as sovereign. The same is true if the Bible teaches that we do have choices to make concerning salvation.

The Human Will...

We might begin with what seems to be a simple incident in the Bible. The sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22). Did Abraham have a choice?... or, did God predetermine that these events would come about as they did? Verse twelve gives us the answer. After Abraham had obeyed, the Lord said, "now I know...". Now the Lord knew that Abraham would obey God in all things. Surely such would not be true if God had preprogrammed everything and already knew how they would come out.

In the New Testament, many references give us the idea that man has a choice regarding salvation. Does this nullify the sovereignty of God? Not if He has determined that we

choose. A point sometimes made about God is that He is able to do all things. Unfortunately that word able gets lost in there, and people come out thinking that God must do all things in order to be God. God is not God because He does all things. He is God because He is able to do all things. When we make Him do all things, we have confined Him as a slave to His own nature.

The true power of God's sovereignty is seen in His ability to make things happen, even in the presence of mankind's free choice. Judas had free choice, but God's sovereign power used that choice to His own glory. The multitude had a choice, and yet all things came to pass as God willed. A puppeteer can make things do as he wishes, but what of One who can take living beings of choice and navigate their whims and choices in bringing about His own will? Now there is true power! But the question still remains. Does mankind really have free will? Can man choose between salvation and damnation?

Can a Man Choose?...

First, let's look at a few passages that seem to say 'no'. Ephesians 1:4f tells us that God chose and predestined the saved. But does this mean that he chose each individual? Isn't Paul's point that Jesus Christ was the means of choosing us - "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world." Jesus Christ was how God chose us. Jesus Christ was also how God predestined us - "by Jesus Christ". Paul is not saying that God looked down through time and picked out each individual He would save. He is saying that He chose all who would meet a certain criteria. He chose that criteria, and each individual meeting such would be saved. What was the criteria God foresaw?... Jesus Christ. This subject is raised by Paul's mention of "every spiritual blessing... in Christ" (v3). From there, everything mentioned is in or by Him (accepted (v6), redemption (v7), purpose of grace (v9), all gathered (v10), inheritance (v11)...). Ephesians one has nothing to do with God looking down the corridor of time and picking out select individuals He would eventually save!

Romans nine has been misinterpreted to mean that God acts contrary to the choices of man to save individuals. Romans nine is not about individual salvation, but instead about God saving the Gentiles. The Jews felt this to be unjust, and Paul is pointing out that God's will is not constrained to follow their inclinations. God had a right to choose Jacob over Esau, but such has no bearing on their eternal salvation. Paul is referring to God's choice of a nation through whom Jesus would come. This becomes extremely clear at the end of the chapter (vv 30-33).

And then we have all of the admonitions of scripture that appeal to humans that they choose the Lord. Peter did this on Pentecost in Acts 2:40. And all through Acts we find pleading for men to choose service to God and salvation (repent). After all, what is repentance? It refers to a change of mind or purpose. But why change my mind if God is only going to save certain people and I'm not one of them?! But God commands all men to repent (Acts 17:30), and desires all to be saved (I Tim 2:4). Does this not exhibit a choice placed before every man?

Conclusion...

God is sovereign. But it will not do to define sovereign in any other way than that which the scriptures indicate. We can weave a complicated theological framework (as has been done) around this word and rest our salvation on our own intellectual prowess... or, we can be satisfied with what God has revealed, and simply submit to the simplicity of His call for loyal faith and obedience.