

Freewill and the Sovereignty of God

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Notice that the title of this essay is *not* ‘Freewill vs. the Sovereignty of God’ for the Scriptures affirm them both. Obviously God is sovereign—he has the right and power to make any and all decisions. Logically, however, this does not demand that he make all decisions or determine all actions; it merely demands that he has the right and power to do so. Part of sovereignty *must*, necessarily, include the ability of the sovereign to delegate authority, decisions, and actions. If he doesn’t have the power to delegate then his power is, to this extent, limited. To illustrate, a king has the sovereign right to send an ambassador to carry out his business and even make independent decisions. Likewise a president or CEO will hire staff. Or the father of a house (adopting the Biblical hierarchy of Eph 5:23; 1 Cor 11:3) could rely on his wife or first-born son, or for that matter, anyone he chooses, to carry out his daily affairs. These are, in fact, the kind of metaphors used of God so the illustrations seem appropriate here.

This essay not only affirms the sovereign rights and powers of God but even his privilege to act in ways we might deem arbitrary. For example Deuteronomy 2:30 says God ‘hardened’ (רָמַם) Sihon so that he refused to allow the Israelites to pass through his land in order that Israel would attack and beat the Ammonites and take their territory. In Judges 14:1-4 Sampson lusts for Philistine women *because* God ordained it! Here is a terribly troubling one: God incited David to number his troops and then punished him for doing so (2 Samuel 24:1). It gets worse: 1 Chronicles 21:1 tells the same story only replaces the word ‘God’ with ‘Satan.’ Apparently Satan incited David to take a census because God bade him do the ‘dirty work.’ In a similar vein, in Ezekiel 14:9 God ‘enticed’ (הִתְנַתֵּן) false prophets and then punished them for telling lies. Even in the New Testament God put a spirit of delusion on people (πλάνης) so they would believe the lie of the Lawless One (2 Thess 2:11). These hardly fits the flannel-graph God of Sunday School. Hence, this essay is not an attempt to rescue God from seemingly arbitrary acts such as third-world poverty, historical human evil, or Pandora’s open box in the natural world such as viruses, earthquakes, chiggers, and country-music. If God is sovereign, as the Bible asserts, then he is perfectly capable of defending himself without my assistance.

Rather this essay is an attempt to understand and affirm several major aspects of the Bible that affirm human freewill at least to some moderate extent.

1. Throughout the Bible, God develops relationships through **covenant**. Each covenant has terms, promises, and punishments. If the terms are kept, one receives the rewards, if they are not, one receives the punishments. Covenant is the macro-structure of the entire Bible (we even name the two major parts of the Bible ‘Old’ and ‘New Testament’). Without freewill, both the invitation to join the covenant and the punishment for breaking the covenant is nonsense ... or at least extraneous. If, after all, God predetermines the destiny of every human being, why go through the extensive legal process of covenant? Just reward those you like and those you don’t can go to Hell.
2. **Conditional Prophecy**, likewise, is an extraneous verbal waste. A conditional prophecy is one that uses or implies the term ‘if.’ God says, “If you do this I will respond in this way, if you do not I will respond differently” (e.g. Isa 1:19–20; cf. Matt 23:37). Ok, *if* I have no choice, then why the ‘if’? It is empty language to offer someone a choice who

actually has no choice. It is like asking a teenage boy if he would like to grow 3 inches or 20. Furthermore, some prophecies to Israel did *not*, in fact, come to pass as God said, precisely *because* the word of the Lord was not obeyed.

3. **God does not want any to perish** (Eze 33:11; 2 Pet 3:9). If our destiny is absolutely controlled by God then (a) he is schizophrenic, or (b) these passages refer to the chosen only. However, if these refer only to the chosen, why are the ‘chosen’ called ‘wicked’? After all, our classification as ‘righteous’ as opposed to ‘wicked’ under total sovereignty would be determined only by God choosing us—*his* choice makes me righteous. Furthermore, 2 Peter says God is waiting patiently for the wicked to repent. How can he wait for that which he determined before the foundation of the world? This is nonsensical. Furthermore, to say that God *wants* the vast majority to go to Hell is a horribly inhospitable thing of which to accuse YHWH. He is a God of love and it is inconceivable that he be compared to a Musilini, Stalin, or Hitler, eradicating all whom he does not arbitrarily deem worthy.
4. **The Bible speaks as if people have choices.** Cain apparently had a choice whether to do what was right or wrong (Gen 4:6–7) and Joshua urged the Israelites to choose whether or not to serve God (Josh 24:15). See also Proverbs 1:29; 3:31; 8:10; Isa 7:15; 56:4. In fact, Israel, God’s ‘chosen’ rejected God and against His will set up kings and idols (Hosea 8:3–4).
5. While none of us accepts the Lord without God’s prior choosing and wooing (John 6:44; 15:16) **we are invited to respond to God’s invitation** (Matt 11:28; 22:1–14). Why are we invited to respond if we are predetermined?
6. **Without human choice the categories of sin and love are both meaningless.** How can we be judged for doing evil that we were forced to do? That is tantamount to shooting pit-bull because he mauled a bunny. That’s what he was *bred* to do; he is not culpable for fulfilling his purpose. Likewise, manipulated or coerced love not only loses all its beauty and charm, it is actually abhorrent. Pedophiles, kidnappers, slave-traders, and pimps sometimes actually do have loyal ‘clients’ but it is because of a psychosis needing treatment, not the gracious love generated only by a divine God.
7. **God changed His mind** on various occasions as a result of people either repenting or praying (cf. Exodus 32:9-13, Numbers 14:10-20, 2 Samuel 24:16, Psalm 106:45, Isaiah 57:6, Jeremiah 18:8, 42:10, Ezekiel 24:14, Jonah 3:9-10 and 4:2).
8. **We are made in the image of God.** That very nature sets us apart from animals. One of the essential characteristics of our *imago dei* is that we have volition. To remove that would radically alter the creation account, making the whole narrative of the fall a farce, not to mention the sacrifice of Jesus, which becomes unnecessary theatrics. For if God *made* us sinners *so that* Jesus would have to die when God could have created us sinless, then we have more significant problems than just figuring out what it means that God is sovereign.