

The Sovereignty of God and Our Wills

We face two basic questions: How does the sovereign God relate to the will of men and women? Are the seeming choices people make merely puppet-like movements, with God as the divine, behind-the-scenes manipulator? And the second question. If we have the free exercise of will, is it of any serious consequence what we do with it? If believers get this wrong, will this not impact their lives, their salvation, and leave an erroneous example to the surrounding culture? (Sovereignty means that God is in complete control. He can do what He wants to do with His creation.)

Obviously, the community of Christian believers is sharply divided on these issues. For example, Philip Yancey, a popular author writes: *Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more—or love us less.* But in contrast, John Wesley (1703-1791), in a famous sermon, said, “The nature of the covenant of grace gives you no ground, no encouragement at all, to set aside any instance or degree of obedience.”

Our purpose in identifying the role and consequences of human will is not a claim that we completely understand God’s sovereignty, let alone challenging His sovereignty. It is not an attempt to explain every Bible account of God’s control versus man’s decision. For example, John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb. This seems not to mean any choice whatsoever on his part. There are also other instances (Pharaoh and Esau, for example) whom God used and judged very negatively.

What is less clear (especially with Pharaoh) is whether he made earlier choices that so far removed him from the favor of God. But even if we are persuaded that the sovereign God made the choices for certain individuals, that is hardly the only measure of sovereignty and could well be seen as the exception, not the rule. This can be illustrated in the way God exercises sovereignty over nature.

We would be shocked, indeed alarmed, if we suddenly discovered the sun standing still in the sky or if it started moving backward. Why? Because the sun doesn’t normally do that. On the other hand, God caused the sun to do exactly that; but as far as we know, it has only happened once. The sun stood still in the sky in Joshua’s day, and it went backward in Hezekiah’s day.

God exercises His sovereignty equally, whether in the usual pattern or in the unusual. The other point that must not be lost is that the common or “normal” course of the sun is as much the work of God as is the unusual. In the same way, all salvation is of the Lord God. It’s within His sovereignty and His mercy to give the call to repent and believe. Giving man a choice is not a violation of God’s sovereignty.

Our initial introduction to Adam and Eve was in a perfect world where personal choice and exercise of the will mirrored a perfect relationship with God. But Satan, in lying deception, persuaded the first couple that the exercise of their will contrary to God’s will would offer them godlikeness.

The sinful choice to disobey God had the same results then as every sinful choice ever since. God did not suppress the exercise of the will, nor the wrong choice itself. But in the aftermath of choosing disobedience to God (carefully hidden behind the desirable looking, but forbidden fruit) they had no control of the consequences of their disobedience. Adam tried to cover his sin by covering himself with fig leaves, but the attempt proved futile.

This single most damaging choice in all of history puts the desires of the flesh at odds with the will of God in control. It contaminates all human decisions and conduct. This doesn't mean that every work of man is obviously corrupt, but that even the "good" is contaminated by the polluted heart. (Whoever offends in one point of the law is guilty of all, according to James 2:10).

One thing that did not happen in the Fall— sin did not "uncreate" man from the image of God. Man is still the threefold being of body, soul, and spirit and retains the functions of mind, will, and emotions of His creation. If this were not so, we should hardly expect God to waste His efforts to save sinful man. Man without the image of God could hardly be of more value than refuse. God did not strip man of the exercise of choice. Quick analysis of God's dealings with the immediate descendants of Adam and Eve—beginning with Cain and Abel— confirms this fact. After rejecting Cain's offering of the fruit of the ground, God clearly put the responsibility back on Cain: *If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?* (Genesis 4:7). Example after example of personal choices and national choices appear throughout the Scriptures, along with many admonitions to choose to serve God. It is a false notion that God superimposes His will on all decisions of people, and that in wrongdoing we really have no choice.

We do not minimize the will of man, but stand in awe of its impact. The only fitting response to the reaping from Adam's choice is that of caution and reverence in decision making, and dread, yea, even terror, of wrong choices. It is men who sow and it is men who will reap. God gives the commandment; man makes the choice; God controls the consequences. He does so justly, and in absolute sovereignty. In fact, none who understand the seriousness of the exercise of the will can be proud or arrogant or delight in having destiny on one's hands. It is a wicked heart that proudly bears the banner of being one's own boss or having the power to do as one pleases.

We are often confronted with making choices with extremely limited knowledge and understanding. The humble person fears his own frailty in this and gladly defers or surrenders the will whenever appropriate. The Bible teaches—indeed commands—this very thing: The child is to defer to parental will, the wife to the husband's, the employee to the employer's, the citizen to laws of the land, and the believer to church authority. Above all, as Jesus submitted His own will to that of the Father, even so we are to measure our choices according to the will of Christ.

It really comes down to making decisions, for the exercise of the will is nothing more or less than that. What lends further sobriety to the exercise of the will is the fact that God judges on motivation and choice, not in whether we have the means to attain the desired outcome. The rich fool in the Bible was judged for planning his security without God, though he never got to realize his dream. The brothers of Joseph would face the judgment of God (had they not repented), not on the good outcome of the ill treatment of their brother, but on their murderous intent. Man sins and faces judgment quite apart from the power or the opportunity to fulfill his sinful intent.

As we saw in the introduction, many today see the exercise of will as being in conflict with justification by faith alone. For that, we would point you to the theology Jesus taught. He describes eternal life as knowing the only true God, through the Son (John 17:3). He goes on to His definition of what it means to be a Christian in terms that many would consider heretical today. The Christian not only knows God. He knows the will of God and actually does it (Matthew 7:21). It will be a horrifying day for many, when Jesus dismisses the workers of iniquity as those that He never knew (Matthew 7:23). The mistake is not in the role of justification by faith, but in putting faith to death by robbing it of life-changing content. Jesus said: *If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love, even as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love* (John 15:10).

~Lester Troyer