

Lesson 6

**SOVEREIGNTY AND RESPONSIBILITY ARE BOTH TAUGHT
IN THE BIBLE**

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. There are two extremes in one's view of God and the world, which should be avoided. One is determinism, which teaches blind ends without means so man's responsibility is abandoned. The other extreme is total freewill in which man is made the master of his own destiny and God is explained away or made less than a man. NOTE: Both of these extremes are prevalent today in secular, religious and Christian circles. Therefore, we must get the Biblical thrust on this subject.
- B. The Bible teaches divine sovereignty and human responsibility. These are both real truths even though we may not understand how they both work at the same time. God's plans and purposes will come to pass because He is the Creator, and yet man is responsible as a creature.

But we believe the Bible teaches that man is a responsible moral agent, though he is also divinely controlled; and man is divinely controlled, though he is also a responsible moral agent. God's sovereignty is a reality, and man's responsibility is a reality too. (Robert E. McNeill, "Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility")

- C. Somehow God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are friends. This is only a problem to man because he is finite, trying to understand the thinking and workings of an infinite God. NOTE: As soon as man thinks he can understand God, then he is not understanding God at all, for there are some mysteries that are left to God alone (Isa. 55:8).

A God whom we could understand exhaustively and whose revelation of Himself confronted us with no mysteries whatsoever, would be a God in man's image, and therefore, an imaginary God, not the God of the Bible at all (McNeill).

II. THE PROBLEM IN SOVEREIGNTY AND RESPONSIBILITY

- A. **Biblical Emphasis:** A Christian must be committed to the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice. The true Christian must always be a Biblicist and not a philosopher, for he is to go to the Bible to get his view of God and the world. A follower of Christ submits his mind to the revealed and inspired truth of the Bible even though he may not be able to reconcile all its teachings. Whenever the Christian leaves the Bible, he has moved into the realm of speculation and philosophy. The Christian must always keep the Biblical emphasis on divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

B. Accurate Definitions

1. When we say that God is sovereign we mean that there is no law of any kind or description anywhere in the universe that can coerce or force God to do anything which He does not please to do. We conclude that God has control and authority over anything or anybody with no limitations (Dan. 4:35; 2 Chron. 20:6).
2. By human responsibility we mean that man is held responsible and accountable by God to obey God through the human will. Man does make choices in this life which result for good or evil (Joshua 24:15, 22; John 3:36; Rom. 6:12-13).

C. Theological Implications: On the one hand, if we fail to acknowledge man's responsibility, we have fatalism (determinism). Those who hold to a full sovereignty of God are often tagged "fatalists." This is really quite sad for those who make these charges are usually ignorant of the whole counsel of God. John Calvin faced these charges and wrote to his opponents the following:

... had you but been willing to look into my books, you would have been convinced at once how offensive to me is the profane term fate; nay, you would have learned that this same abhorrent term was cast in the teeth of Augustine by his opponents.

On the other hand, if we fail to acknowledge God's full sovereignty, we have denied God. We have accepted, for all practical purposes, a form of atheism, for God is made less than a man. God is either sovereign in and over all things or He is not God.

Now, if I were to declare that man was so free to act that there was no control of God over his actions, I should be driven very near to atheism; and if, on the other hand, I should declare that God so over-rules all things that man is not free enough to be responsible, I should be driven at once into Antinomianism or fatalism. That God predestines, and yet that man is responsible, are two facts that few can clearly see. They are believed to be inconsistent and contradictory; but they are not. The fault is in our weak judgment. Two truths cannot be contradictory to each other. If, then, I find taught in one part of the Bible that everything is fore-ordained, that is true; and if I find, in another Scripture, that man is responsible for all his actions, that is true; and it is only my folly that leads me to imagine that these two truths can ever contradict each other. (C. H. Spurgeon, A Defense of Calvinism)

D. Great Mystery: The alert student of the Bible will immediately see that the scriptures teach both God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. These are two irreconcilable truths to the human mind but are no problem for God. Sovereignty and responsibility are not enemies but friends, and Spurgeon said, "I never reconcile friends."

[See attached Chart]

NOTE: These two truths present a mystery or paradox to the human mind. It is actually an antinomy of two equal truths irreconcilable to the human mind. The Bible teaches that God is 100% sovereign and that man is 100% responsible for his actions.

III. THE BIBLICAL TEACHING OF SOVEREIGNTY AND RESPONSIBILITY

- A. Introduction: God's sovereignty and human responsibility are taught all through the Bible and sometimes in the same context or verse. As we read the Bible we get the impression that God has a plan that will come to pass and that plan includes the responsible acts of men.
- B. Acts of Sin (Gen. 45:5, 8; 50:20): The brothers of Joseph, by a free act of their wills, sold Joseph into slavery. They were totally responsible for that act and disciplined for it. However, while they felt no divine coercion, they were really carrying out God's secret plans and purposes.
- C. Thoughts and Intents of Men (Gen. 20:6): Abraham lied about his wife Sarah and said she was his sister. King Abimelech took her to lie with her but God intervened through a dream before he could get involved with Sarah. Abimelech close not to lie with Sarah, but God said that He was the one who held him from sinning. NOTE: Here is a specific case where God did exert His power, restrict man's freedom and actually prevented him from doing that which he otherwise would have done.
- D. Acts of Men (Ex. 4:21; 8:13; 9:12): The Book of Exodus tells us how God predicted that He would harden Pharaoh's heart and actually hardened it so that he would do God's purposes, but Pharaoh also hardened his own heart. Pharaoh was acting freely but carrying out the divine purposes of God (Rom. 9:17).
- E. Acts of Nations (Ex. 12:35-36): The Egyptians willfully and gladly let the children of Israel spoil or plunder them of great wealth because the Lord made them willing.
- F. Acts of Kings (Isa. 10:5-15): The King of Assyria was raised up by God to bring his armies against Israel as a disciplinary action and yet the King, as far as he knew, was acting freely. God also disciplined the King for his evil actions.
- G. Acts of Satan (Job 1:12; 2:6): Satan acted freely to bring destruction upon Job but only by God's permission.
- H. Acts of Government (John 19:10-11): Pilate felt he was free to put Christ to death but he could only do so if God willed it, for He is in control of all things.
- I. The Cross (Acts 4:26-28; 2:23): Every little detail of Christ's crucifixion was determined by God and no human being through his freewill could have thwarted God's plan. Yet, God held the men 100% responsible for putting Christ to death.
- J. Judas (Luke 22:22): It was part of the eternal plan of God for Judas to betray the Lord Jesus Christ, but he was held totally responsible for this act and was judged for it.
- K. Sanctification (Phil. 2:12-13): In the progressive sanctification process (Christian living), Christians are to work out their own salvation because God is at work in them. Each Christian is responsible for all actions and if any good acts are done it is by the pure grace of God.

IV. SALVATION RELATED TO SOVEREIGNTY AND RESPONSIBILITY

- A. Most Christians are willing to admit to the sovereignty of God in every area except the will of man as it relates to salvation. They feel that man is totally free to choose for or against God. Those who hold this view do not see that man's will is a slave to sin nor do they accept the mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. NOTE: Man was free and responsible to God before the Fall. Since sin entered the human race, man is still responsible to God but has lost his freedom to choose for God, for his will is a slave to his own nature. Sin has made man unable to choose but he is still held responsible before God to choose for Him. Inability does not cancel responsibility. It is precisely at this point that God in grace must move to enable the sinner to believe in Christ.
- B. The mystery of God's work and man's response is just as prevalent when it comes to the area of salvation (John 1:12-13; 6:37; Matt. 11:29-30). Salvation is all of God and man is responsible to believe the gospel. God's election, predestination and call to salvation are true (Eph. 1:4; Rom. 8:28-30; 2 Tim. 1:9) and man's need to respond to the gospel by faith is also true (John 3:16; Rom. 1:16). God's elective purposes are always related to belief of the truth (2 Thess. 2:13; Eph. 2:8-9). NOTE: God does not save apart from the human will but through the human will.
- C. Those who believe in the sovereign purposes of God in salvation must always balance their teaching with human responsibility. The free offer of the gospel is to be made to all men, for God has commanded all men to repent (Acts 17:30) and He would save all if all would come to Him (Matt. 23:37). Whoever wills to come to Christ may come (Rev. 22:17), and those who do will to come were drawn by God to salvation (John 6:44).
- D. If a Christian cannot make a free offer of the gospel to all men without distinction, then he has left the Biblical emphasis. Those who do not make a free offer of the gospel have become fatalists who do not balance God's sovereign election and human responsibility. Those who have come to see the marvelous truths of sovereign election and predestination often get all tied up in their logic and become paralyzed by their own system so as to play down human responsibility. They leave the biblical emphasis and move into philosophy and speculation. NOTE: The Bible teaches that no man is responsible for his salvation (for salvation is a gift from God), but men are responsible for their damnation.
- E. God has His elect who will be saved and they are known only to Him. God makes a free offer of the gospel to all men and "whosoever will" receive Him shall be saved. Those who believe in Christ were chosen in the eternal plan of God. No human being should ever try to determine who the elect are, but should preach the gospel to all men, trusting God to do His work to save.

V. EVANGELISM RELATED TO SOVEREIGNTY AND RESPONSIBILITY

- A. The Christian's responsibility is to take the gospel to all men (Mark 16:15) and "whosoever" believes shall be saved (John 3:16). The passion of a Christian's heart should be that men will be saved by God's infinite grace through Christ.
- B. The Christian's confidence is that God will open up hearts to hear the gospel when it is preached (Acts 16:14). A knowledge that God is calling out a people for his name (Acts 15:14) and appointing men to eternal life should keep the Christian from discouragement in evangelism, on his knees for God to work, and anxiously anticipating God's sovereign dealings with men.

- C. Knowing that God is at work to save men should get the Christian very excited about sharing Christ with others, for he sees God at work and carrying out His purposes (Acts 13:48-49).

VI. PRAYER RELATED TO SOVEREIGNTY AND RESPONSIBILITY

- A. Christians ought always to pray (Luke 18:1), and they have not because they ask not (James 4:2). If we do not pray God is not going to answer our prayers.
- B. Yet, we must pray according to God's will in order to get our answers to prayer (1 John 5:14-15). This is the great mystery of prayer.