

## DOES GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY OVERRIDE OUR FREE WILL?

Exodus 7:13, Ephesians 1:4

By Raymond White

There are two things that we want God to be that are in direct conflict with each other. On the one hand we want God to be so sovereign, so in charge that he cannot be defeated by any enemy, because if he can be defeated, then we face a possibly inescapably bleak eternity. But on the other hand, we really do want our freewill, and the problem is that his absolute sovereignty annihilates our freewill. For example —

### [1] PHARAOH

*Exodus 7:13* And he [God] hardened Pharaoh's heart that he hearkened not...

*Exodus 8:15* When Pharaoh saw that there was respite, he hardened his heart...

*Exodus 9:12* And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh...

*Exodus 9:34* ...he sinned yet more, and hardened his heart...

*Exodus 10:1* ...Go in unto Pharaoh: for I have hardened his heart...

*Exodus 10:20* But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart...

*Exodus 10:27* But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart...

*Exodus 11:10* And the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart...

*Exodus 14:18* And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt...

Seven times God hardened Pharaoh's heart, twice Pharaoh hardened his own heart. So, where is Pharaoh's freewill? He seems to have freewill until God decides to override it

This is a disconcerting idea that God might be the instigator of our sinful decisions and wrong doings. It's is particularly disconcerting to think that God threatens us with eternal punishment for violating his word then he causes us to violate his will. Not only does that leave us with no free will to choose right, but in a sense it makes God sin against himself, being the initiator of the very sin that offends him.

And besides, in legal terms, that's entrapment and that's no fair.

I have another exegesis that helps me, which you may or may not like.

### [2] MY EXEGESIS

Suppose we take the word "hardened" more literally. We tend to understand "hardened" figuratively, as in changing ones opinion from a right thing to a wrong thing, as in this case God made Pharaoh believe something wrong and evil.

But suppose it doesn't mean that at all, doesn't mean directing ones heart to wrong. Suppose it mean what it says, to firm up, to make rigid, to solidify. In other words, not to *turn to* a wrong idea, but to *lock in* a wrong idea that is already there. In an idiom: to cast in concrete.

If that is the real meaning, then God is not responsible for Pharaoh's wrong idea at all. Pharaoh is. But when Pharaoh's mind arrives at the wrong idea, and acts on it, God locks him into it allowing him no opportunity to escape.

That is much more reasonable.

But, you may complain, if God does not allow someone the opportunity to repent, that *is* unreasonable. No, it is not unreasonable. And there is a frightening lesson here. While God is obligated by his own purpose to allow us true free will to decide to accept or reject him, he is under no obligation, once we have rejected, to allow us to change our mind. He may or may not. Every choice you make, good or bad, God may accept as final.

### [3] MY PARABLE

I'll make my point with a parable which I am about to make up.

Two teenage boys rob a bank. They don't get away, there is a shoot out with cops, one boy is killed, the other boy goes to prison for ten years. The first goes to hell. The second changes his life in prison, finds God, gets a college degree, is released, gets a job, goes to church, gives to charities, gets married, has good children and grandchildren, dies of old age surrounded by people who love him, and goes to heaven.

Now, what's the difference between these two lives and these two eternities? The trajectory of a random bullet fired by a police officer — that's the only difference. And who decided that bullet would kill the first boy and not the second? The cop? Hardly. He was just shooting. Fate? Did fate roll the dice with these two lives? Maybe. How about just dumb blind luck? I guess. Or was it God? Was God saying to the first, "Your time is up," but to the second, "Your time is just beginning"?

Does God really do that? Apparently he does. And it's not just a matter of Bible interpretation, but an observation of life.

Pick a number, from zero to a hundred. Go on, pick. I can pretty much guarantee you that there is someone on planet earth who will die today *at that age*.

What's the point? The point is this: You don't know when you will die. But there will be a final breath, a final kiss, a final view of this beautiful world, and there will be a final decision. The problem is, since you don't know when that moment of death will be, any wrong decision you make may be final, and that's what you'll be stuck with forever.

Now, if God determines your moment of death, then he also determines which of your decisions he accepts as final. God does not contest your freewill, he merely accepts the consequences of your freewill as he wishes.

It's like basketball which is played with a clock. A game ends 61 to 60. But the losing team was poised for another shot when the final buzzer rang. In fact the shooter did shoot and the ball did go in the hoop. But it didn't count, the game was over. But if the game had last just two more seconds — yeah, well, but it didn't. But shouldn't he have just two more seconds? But that would be unfair to the other team. But that's arbitrary. Yes, it is. But that's the game. And that's life. Life is arbitrary. You are playing life by fixed rules that you cannot change.

To say it another way, there is a point where God just finally gives up, stops the game, and accepts your final offer, good or bad.

So, if God can accept your decision as final by ending your life, why should he not be allowed to accept your decision as final as you live and breath? God does that too.

*Genesis 6:3 My spirit will not always strive with man...*

**Romans 1:28** *And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things that are not convenient;*

And that, I believe, was the case with Pharaoh. He made a wrong choice and God finalized that choice. He might as well have died, but God had use for that wrong choice.

#### [4] SAUL

Here is another Bible story that speaks to the same issue.

**1 Samuel 16:14** *But the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD troubled him.*

Hinting of pre-destination, it does seem the God puts an end to a man's ability to repent. So much for free agency. But this is not quite pre-destination, nor does it conflict with free agency. Saul *did* choose. Rather than serve God, Saul chose to use God for his own stubborn purposes. All God did was finalized Saul's decision, and that is God's prerogative.

When you make a decision, fate may allow you time to change your mind, or it may not. If your time is up, too bad, your fate is sealed, and *you can't argue*. After all, your final decisions are *your* final decisions.

You have the right and the freewill to make any choice you want. Just remember that God has the right and the means to seal your choice as final, and death is not the only means that God uses to lock up your freewill.

Exodus says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. That does not imply that God forced Pharaoh to a wrong choice, it implies that once Pharaoh had made a wrong choice, God cemented that choice and made it final.

It was circumstance, physical and spiritual, that did not permit Pharaoh to change his mind, and Saul finds himself locked into that same dark place.

Warning: Do not ever intentionally make a wrong choice. You may have an opportunity to repent, or you may not. As a saying goes, "It's easy to repent of smoking, it's harder to repent of lung cancer." That applies as well to sex and AIDS.

#### [5] REHOBOAM

**1 Kings 12:15** *Wherefore the king [Rehoboam] hearkened not unto the people; for the cause was from the LORD, that he might perform his saying, which the LORD spake by Ahijah the Shilonite unto Jeroboam the son of Nebat.*

Rehoboam's decision here (foolish but not sinful) fits right in with God's prophecy. We wonder, did God make Rehoboam make that foolish decision to ignore the will of the people? If so, did God's interference deprive Rehoboam of free agency? Or did God just choose the right man for the right moment to bring about his will? Or did God cheat and peek into the future implying that the future is set? Or did God use some other means that we would not understand? Take your guess.

## [6] OTHER VERSES

*Proverbs 20:24* Man's goings are of the LORD; how can a man then understand his own way?

A predestinationist would certainly use this verse for his argument. No matter what we do, God is behind it all pulling the strings. So there's no point trying to figure out why we do what we do.

*Proverbs 21:1* The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.

This doesn't leave much room for free agency, if God is controlling the hearts of the kings like puppets.

*Ecclesiastes 9:1* ...the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God: no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them.

The first assertion, *in the hand of God*, argues against free will. The second assertion, *no man knoweth either love or hatred*, means stop trying to figure it out.

*Isaiah 63:17* O LORD, why hast thou made us to err from thy ways, and hardened our heart from thy fear? Return for thy servants' sake, the tribes of thine inheritance.

God makes us err? Purposely causes to violate his own commandments? That's what the text is saying.

## [7] THE FUTURE

*Isaiah 22:11* Ye made also a ditch between the two walls for the water of the old pool: but ye have not looked unto the maker thereof, neither had respect unto him that fashioned it long ago.

This verse gives us a more reasonable view of God's sovereignty. It's not that controls the future, and it's not that God manipulates our hearts and minds. It's simply that God controls the circumstances around us and sort of channels us to where he wants us to go. And that takes real effort on God's part.

Here's the parable of this verse: You build a canal for military defense (between the two walls), and you take credit for having built it. But you're not giving God the credit he deserves for making it possible for you to build the canal. God arranged all this long ago. He put the dirt and the rocks and the water there long ago, and planned for you to build it. Therefore God deserves the credit.

Is that predestination? Not really, because God had to manipulate things to get what he wanted done. And while that may be sovereignty, it is not predestination.

## [8] GOVERNMENTS

*Daniel 2:21 ...he removeth kings, and setteth up kings...:37 Thou, O king, art a king of kings: for the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory.*

The kings of England claimed divine right. This verse gave them their argument: that they had a right to be king because God had enthroned them. But they overlooked the possibility that God could just easily dethrone them, and sometimes did. Ask king Louie XVI of France, or Czar Nicholas of Russia, or Pharaoh Hophra the last of his 1000 year Egyptian dynasty, or for that matter, Abe Lincoln and John Kennedy.

*Daniel 4:25 ...the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will.*

So there's not much point of being jealous of rich and successful people. God picks and chooses. If God didn't choose you, oh well. Reach for something else, for something better.

## [9] YOUR SUCCESS AND FAILURE

*Job 19:21 The hand of God hath touched me.*

Job is forced to three conclusions: (1) God has done all this to me, (2) I am innocent and do not deserve it, and (3) But it is God's right to do it anyway.

*Job 23:13 But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? And what his soul desireth, even that he doeth. :14 For he performeth the thing that is appointed for me: and many such things are with him.*

You think you can persuade God to change his mind? Forget it. Once he's made up his mind to do a thing, he'll do it.

This is the opposite of prayer and petition. A man of prayer seeks to persuade God to change his mind. But a fatalist, as Job now is, concludes, why bother? This story of Job in the end gives us the very reason why we should indeed bother: God did in the end change Job's life. So Job's fatalism was wrong.

## [10] GOOD AND EVIL

We are always anxious to give God credit for all the good in the world, but just as anxious to absolve him of any bad in the world. Like Pilate who washed his hands, we want to wash God's hands to make sure they are squeaky clean, and so we say things like, "God would not have caused those children to die so it was just bad luck."

But that's worse because it makes God unable to deal with bad luck. It places the world out of his control after all and that's far more dangerous.

## [11] THE THEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE

Here's the theological struggle: Which is worse? That bad things happen because the sovereign God causes them to happen, or because the less-than-sovereign God is helpless to prevent them? Pick your poison. The bible argues both ways.

I'll share my preference with you although I'm by no means certain of it: When really bad things happen to me or to those I love, I would far rather believe that God's hand is in it and that there is some purpose to it, rather than believe that this bad thing happened because God lost control of things for awhile and he's really innocent after all. "I couldn't help it" is a poor apology for God. We should stop apologizing for God. He doesn't need our excuses.

But I am also not will to surrender to predestination, so I prefer to see God as a divine manipulator, and that is how he imposes his sovereignty, by doing things. Predestination would not require him to do anything, the future just is. I prefer an involved God.

*Job 30:20 I cry unto thee, and thou dost not hear me: I stand up, and thou regardest me not. :21 Thou art become cruel to me: with thy strong hand thou opposest thyself against me. :22 Thou liftest me up to the wind; thou causest me to ride upon it, and dissolvest my substance.*

This sounds like an involved God to me, "Thou art become cruel."

Is Job wrong for laying his current circumstances at the feet of God? No, he's not wrong, he's absolutely correct which is the whole point of the Book of Job. But Job is not blaming God, but he is acknowledging the situation for what it is, and at the same time acknowledging that God has a right to do as he chooses for whatever purpose Job can't imagine and neither can I. But that's the deal, isn't it? Better that than the alternative.

Now that you have my theology, let's roll out all the pertinent verses quickly. Then you can make up your own mind.

## [12] SOVEREIGNTY

*John 1:12 to them that believe :13 were born, not...of the will of man, but of God.*

*John 6:37 All that the Father giveth me shall come to me*

*John 6:44 No man can come to me except the Father...draw him...*

*John 10:26 But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep ...*

*Acts 2:23 ...by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken ...*

*Romans 9:20 ...who art thou that repliest against God...Why hast thou made me thus?\*

*1 Corinthians 15:10 But by the grace of God I am what I am ...*

*Ephesians 1:4 ... he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world ...*

*Ephesians 1:5 Having predestinated (pra-a-rid-zo = marked out boundary) us ...*

*Ephesians 1:11 ... being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh ...*

*Philippians 1:6 ...he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it ...*

*2 Timothy 2:19 ...having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are his ...*

*Hebrews 12:2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith ...*

*Revelation 17:8 ...whose names are not written in the book of life from the foundation ...*

This word “predestination” is at the heart of our theological difficulty. The Greek word pra-a-rid-zo literally means marked-out-boundary. But should that be properly translated predestination or something else? A few English translations use foreordination instead though most retain predestination.

So the debate hinges on, what do those English words mean, and how did God mark out his marked-out-boundary?

Here’s what I think, take it or leave it.

Predestination (the English word) means that the universe is (either by its nature or because God made it so) deterministic. That scientific word means that if you knew the absolute current state of the universe then you could determine that absolute next state of the universe. There are no unknowns because there is no randomness. Thus the future is cast in concrete.

Science now believes (because of Heisenberg, Schrodinger, and others of that crowd) that there is true randomness, true unknowables in the universe and therefore the universe is not deterministic.

What that means theologically is that God does not look at a pre-set future and say, “Aha! Now I know what’s going to happen.” If he knows the future, and the bible insists that he does, it is for some other reason. Predestination equals determinism and neither are true.

So, how does God have a marked-out-boundary? Because he marks it out. That is, he acts, he works at it. He is involved. The word foreordination really is a much better word than predestination because it does not deprive us of our free agency. Instead, God, in order to assert his sovereignty, must work with our free agency to get what he wants. And I think that is consistent with anything the bible says.

### [13] FREE AGENCY

*Deuteronomy 11:26 I set before you a blessing and a curse :27 a blessing if you obey...*

*Deuteronomy 30:15 I set before you life and good, and death and evil :19 choose life...*

*Joshua 24:15 ...choose you this day whom ye will serve ...*

*1 Kings 18:21 How long halt ye between two opinions? If the LORD be God, follow him...*

*Acts 2:40 ...Save yourselves from this untoward generation.*

*Galatians 6:7 Be not deceived...whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.*

*Philippians 2:12 ...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*

That God said “choose” can only mean that we have a choice and the ability to choose. If God’s sovereignty chooses for us (predestination), then what’s the point? It must be that God asserts his sovereignty without infringing on our free agency.

Earlier I said that science presents us with two possibilities: determination (no randomness) and not determination (randomness). But actually there are three possibilities if we allow two kinds of randomness. There is physical randomness (i.e. chaos), and free will (i.e. the stock market). Both make the universe unpredictable.

Philosophers debate the existence of free will, but for believers, there is no doubt. Of course there is free will. And in the absence of predestination, free will and agency, introduce randomness into the universe which creates a challenge for God’s sovereignty.

But, since he is a working God who is omnipotent (or nearly so), he is up to the task of having his sovereign way in spite of randomness. If he relied on predestination, he wouldn't be so powerful after all, he'd just be a cheat who stacks the deck.

#### [14] SECURITY

In any serious discussion of sovereignty, one ought not to skip over security, for the reason that security is the basic reason we discuss sovereignty in the first place. We want to be secure, and we appeal to God's sovereignty to assure us about that.

So, are we secure? The bible unnervingly says yes — and no.

Here are some “yes” verses.

*John 5:24* He that heareth my word and believeth...hath...passed from death to life...

*Romans 5:9* ...being now justified, we shall be saved from wrath through him.

*Philippians 4:7* ...God...shall keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ.

*2 Corinthians 5:19* ,,not imputing their trespasses ... [not keeping account in a ledger]

*1 Peter 1:5* Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ...

*2 Peter 2:9* The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptation...

And here are some “no” verses, what I call the *if* verses.

*Romans 8:13* ...if ye through the spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

*Romans 8:17* ...if so be that we suffer with him.

*1 Corinthians 15:2* ...if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you...

*Colossians 1:23* If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled...

*Hebrews 3:6* ...if we hold fast the confidence...

*2 Peter 1:10* ...if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.

*1 John 2:3* ...if we keep his commandments

*1 John 2:24* ... If that which ye heard from the beginning shall remain in you...

That's a lot of *if*'s. On one hand, God says he will not keep track of your failures (not impute). On the other hand, you are secure *if* you do this, and *if* you do that, and *if* you continue. And if that's not keeping track, I don't know what is. It's like the well worn punch line: “But whose counting?” God seems to be counting, but he denies it.

So, is that security or not? You decide. I suppose it depends on just how sovereign God wants to be. Does he want to be so sovereign that all those *if* possibilities are not really possible? It depends on which verses you read. And if God really secures us against those impossible possibilities, then why all the *if*'s?

I have a possible solution to all this mess. But you might not like it. So I give you permission to stop right here if you wish. But if you continue, my solution is —

#### [15] PRE-EXISTENCE

Let's return to the dilemma: Even though I have dismissed predestination as the way God asserts his sovereignty, and allow God to work with, or fine tune, or tweak the universe as he goes — (which must be the case, otherwise why would he bother to have

angels who do much of the heavy lifting) — we still have this problem: How does God decide who is and is not in his marked-out-boundary? What was his criterion before he made us? Even foreordination does not answer that question, because even with free agency, how did he know who to foreordain?

The simple answer is that he foreknew us because he knows the future. But that's predestination and we're right back to why bother about anything if the future is set.

There are three possibilities. Maybe there are more but if so, they are off my intellectual periphery. Here are the three:

1. God sees the pre-set future. That's predestination. The bible and logic reject that.
2. God's foreordinations are arbitrary. So, why judge if he's judging his own work?
3. God's foreordinations are based on some prior knowledge of us. Let's try that.

Suppose God knew us and our natures before we were born. That forces us to ask, did we already exist or not? In other words, did he know the non-existent us or the existent us?

If he knew the non-existent us, then what we would become at creation including our wills was entirely his architecture which would make our free agency an illusion, and his foreordinations would necessarily be random, arbitrary, and capricious. So that won't do.

And therefore, the us that he knew before creation was an existent us, and that makes it all work. He was able to foreordain us because he knew us, not a potential us but the actual us. And based on his knowledge of us, his sovereignty was able to focus the future to what he wanted it to be, and arrange events to cause us to be what we are.

In other words, we had a pre-existent existence.

If you think there is another solution to the riddle, I'd be happy to hear, but you already have the pertinent scriptures, decipher them if you can. I believe your struggle with them will lead you to my conclusion, we existed before we were created, God knew us, and that knowledge of us enabled him to direct our paths to become what he knew we must become from our own free agent choices.

Last question: In that case, does the bible give us any hint of a pre-existent existence? Here are the pertinent clues that I know of.

***Genesis 2:5** And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew ...*

How can there be plants before they were in the earth? And how can there be herbs before they grew? This conjures up an image of some kind of divine green house from which our plants came.

***Genesis 2:7** And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life...*

This breath of life is man's spirit or soul. The verse does not say that God created this spirit, but that he brought it to man from some other place.

***Job 38:4** Where wast thou when I laid the foundation of the earth? :7 When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?*

Two points here: First, a question: Where were you Job when I built the earth? Is that a rhetorical question that expects no answer? Or is God saying that Job was somewhere and God's expects Job to know? Second, a reference: Who were the sons of God? Us, or angels, or someone else? The implication is that the sons of God were us.

***Ecclesiastes 12:7** The shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.*

This is the reverse of **Genesis 2:7**. There the body is formed and the spirit comes. Here the body dissolves and the spirit returns. Returns to where? To God for an afterlife existence. But the spirit cannot return to where it has never been, can it? That it returns is evidence that where it returns to it originally came from.

***Jeremiah 1:5** Before I [God] formed thee in the belly I knew thee ...*

Was this an acquaintance between God and a non-existent being who existed only in God's mind? There are no good reasons to believe that. But there are good reasons to believe that this was an acquaintance between God and the pre-existing Jeremiah, that God personally knew the actual him.

***John 9:2** And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?*

This was not a rhetorical question. They expected a straightforward answer from Jesus and that's what they got. He answered, neither. But the answer could have been the man. The question tells us that in their minds anyway, a man can sin before he was born. And Jesus did not correct their theological flaw because it wasn't a theological flaw.

***Romans 5:10** For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. :11 And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.*

These two words, reconciled and atonement, are the same Greek word, katallage, and it means, quite rightly, reconciled. So, what does reconcile mean? It means two friends became enemies, then became friends again. Well if the whole human race was born enemies of God requiring a reconciliation, then when were we ever friends with God? The only possible answer is before we were born.

***Hebrews 12:9** Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?*

That spirit, that breath of life that God breathed into Adam, and subsequently into us all, was in some sense God's progeny, and he is literally the Father of our spirits. And whatever that means, it means something. And where was it before we were born? It was somewhere.

## [16] SUMMARY

I did not intend for this to be a discourse on pre-existence, it just turned out that way. And it turned out that way because I honestly cannot think of any other way to reconcile the inescapable notions of God's sovereignty and man's free agency.

The question, "Who's in charge here?" might be easily answered except that the bible gives us two answers — I'm in charge of me and God is in charge of me — and those two answers conflict. And saying both doesn't help. An atheist might say neither, but that doesn't help either.

The doctrine of predestination solves the conflict by surrendering one side (free agency) completely to the other (sovereignty). But that makes everything that God has done with us pointless and besides, it's not a scripturally sound notion despite the King James translation.

And so we use instead the word foreordination. But that word, while rescuing us from the dark notions of predestination, do little to reduce the tension between the opposite notions of sovereignty and free agency. Indeed, those two notions feel a bit like the two jaws of a vice mercilessly squeezing on something in between, and that something is foreordination.

But foreordination *can* stand firm between those two opposites *if* we allow a pre-existence where God and man co-existed for a time, and where God determined the course of each man's destiny and how he would use his irresistible sovereignty to bring each man to his proper conclusion.

In this view, if man is fated, then man has fated himself. If we are permanently incarcerated in a cell called destiny, it is we who hold the keys and will not let ourselves out. But it is God and his sovereignty that leads us comfortably to our cells which we had long ago called ahead for reservations.

Actually though, I don't think the truth is quite that dark, at least I hope it isn't. Anyway, now you have all the verses, now *you* struggle with them.