

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## Freedoms and Liberties: Human Freedom versus God's Sovereignty

Human beings have freedom to choose, even to choose to sin. In what way, if any, does this freedom impinge on the sovereign will of God? Can human freedom to make choices 'frustrate' the Almighty God and His plans? At a personal level, how can I be held responsible for sins that appear to accomplish God's own purpose? What are the limits, if any, to human freedom? In particular, is the Cross of Christ both the fixed, eternal plan of God and a shocking crime, for which those involved are rightly responsible? A solemn consideration indeed!

Before we get down to detail, I must say this. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that God forces to believe the gospel any who do not want to believe. Likewise, nowhere in the Bible does it say that God prevents from believing any who wish to believe. Those who find it difficult to accept that God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are both valid considerations are sometimes tempted to make such assumptions. Scripture does not in any way or in any place support such views. What I would say is this. We are wise to accept personal responsibility for all our actions, failures and sins. We are equally wise to give the credit and the glory to God for all the blessing into which we have been brought as a result of the work of Christ on our behalf.

As a start, let us imagine a group of friends discussing a mutual acquaintance. John sets the ball rolling. "I'm very glad that my friend Tom has such a very cheerful disposition". Vera chimes in. "Oh no!" she says. "That can't be true. He's at least six feet tall." Mary cuts across Vera. "Vera, dear! I've known him for as long as any of you. I'm telling you he's over 200 pounds in weight." "That's ridiculous!" retorts Jim, who has been waiting rather impatiently to join in. "I'm sorry to have to correct you all. He quite definitely has green eyes." Bill joins in; he is feeling very irritated. "But, surely, you all know that he is a very competent bricklayer. In his spare time he is very kind and helpful. He does odd jobs for old people who cannot afford to pay for them to be done."

Eventually, Sarah joins in the discussion. "Come on! Do you not all realise that all these things can be and are true of the same person. There is no conflict or contradiction at all between any of the things that have been mentioned. They are all true." How right she was! Her friends were talking as though because one of the features was true of their friend, that necessarily excluded the other things which were, in reality, equally true.

That sort of illustration often comes to my mind when I hear heated discussion about the subject of today's talk. There is no real conflict or contradiction at all between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. As with the physical and moral qualities of the aforementioned Tom, they are both valid considerations. Each stands on its own feet. Each is taught in the Bible, the only real authority and guide to what we must believe on all important matters of faith and right living.

Some of the things said about Tom were quite unrelated to each other, except that they refer to the same person. Other features like height and weight have either a direct or indirect relationship to each other. Of course, the physical and moral features of Tom as discussed by his friends were all within the realm of their own natural understanding. We cannot say the same about spiritual matters. God is infinite in His wisdom. We are finite creatures of limited understanding. We cannot reasonably expect to enter intelligently into all the infinite, eternal aspects of the spiritual realm. Added to that, our senses and understanding have been blunted by the effects of sin. It would be sheer pride, and utter folly, for any of us to assume that if we cannot understand something, therefore it cannot be true. On the other hand, happy are we if we have trusted Christ as our Saviour, and have confessed Him as our Lord. We have the Bible - the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God available to us. We also have the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth. The Lord Jesus said so to His disciples before He left them to go back to His Father in heaven.

First, we shall look at each of our two major topics on its own. We shall probably find each consideration quite understandable in its own sphere. God is sovereign. Man is a responsible creature with the opportunity to make choices. Both statements are clearly true, and should be readily acceptable to an honest enquirer. However, it is when we try to put them together that we find that their mutual relation is quite beyond our natural comprehension. We must accept that. So, later on, we shall look at one or two Scriptures where both concepts are, or certainly seem to be, brought together.

First of all, then, what do we understand by the expression 'The Sovereignty of God'? God is omnipotent. He is omniscient. He is omnipresent. What do these words mean? God is omnipotent. That is, He is all-powerful. He has the power to achieve anything He chooses to do (read 1 Timothy 6:15). Also, God is omniscient. That is, He knows everything, and everybody, through and through (read 1 Chronicles 28:9; 1 Timothy 1:17; Hebrews 4:13). When the Apostle Peter said to the Lord Jesus, "Lord, Thou knowest all things" (John 21:17) he was acknowledging His Master's deity. Jesus is God, and God knows everything. He is omniscient. Then, again, God is omnipresent. That is, He has the facility to be everywhere at the same time (read Psalm 139:7-10).

Overall, God knows exactly what He intends to do. He also has the power and wisdom to carry it out (see Ephesians 1:7-11; 3:10-11; Romans 8:28-32). He is the Potter, we are the clay (read Job 10:9; Isaiah 45:9; Jeremiah 18:6; Romans 9:20-21). That leads us on to think about 'The Responsibility of Man'.

Man, a creature of God, has been made with the capacity to make choices and decisions in every sphere of his life. He is responsible to God his Maker for the results and effects of those choices and decisions. We are not held responsible for having the sinful nature we have inherited from Adam. We are each responsible for allowing that sinful nature to express itself in actual sins, sinful deeds and thoughts in our own lives.

As individuals, we shall have to give a personal account of that responsibility at The Great White Throne (read Romans 14:10; Revelation 20:11-12). Romans 3:23 sums up the situation succinctly and without any frills: 'all have sinned and come short of the glory of God'. Not only guilty before God and condemned, but totally and completely incapable of doing anything to get right with God. We have nothing to offer to find favour with God. Nothing to sacrifice to mitigate His wrath! No way in which to vindicate His righteous claims upon us! But such is the goodness of God that He has used such circumstances as a platform for the demonstration of His own sovereign mercy, grace and love.

Summing up then, God is sovereign. He will accomplish His eternal purpose, in scope and in detail. Man, on his part, is able to decide what he will do with his own life, but is responsible to God for the results and effects of those decisions.

Can these apparently conflicting and mutually contradictory concepts both be true? Oh, yes! Can they by any means be brought together? Well, I might not be able to do so, but God certainly can and does. We shall now look at some scriptures which actually say just that.

In Acts 2:22-23, we learn that, in preaching to devout Jews out of every nation, Peter had to say: "Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain".

The Cross of Christ is the focal point of God's plans. It is also the righteous basis and rock-solid foundation for all justice and all blessing.

The purpose of God reveals what God has ever had in mind. The counsel of God reveals how that same God will accomplish that purpose. That does not reduce at all, or in any way, or in any sense the grave responsibility of those wicked men who, having plotted in advance, apprehended the Lord Jesus. They subjected Him to that hideous mock trial (Matthew 26:57-68, 27:1-2, 11-14). Against all principles of normal righteous judgment, they insisted that He be crucified (Matthew 27:22). Those wicked men will stand before God at the final judgment at The Great White Throne and, like all men, will be judged according to their own works (Revelation 20:11-12). And yet God, in His sovereign grace, has used that very circumstance as the basis and foundation of all justice and all blessing.

Both aspects of this crucial event are fully and perfectly true. God will sovereignly bless all who believe that God Himself has provided a Saviour, Who died at Calvary for our sins. But God will certainly hold responsible, to Himself, those who chose to murder His well beloved Son.

Once more, how about us in our day? Like Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:1-6), we have sinned against God. We cannot blame them for our position before God. Like them, and like the evil men who crucified the Lord Jesus, we shall give due answer to God at the final judgment. As Romans 5:12 says. 'Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.' Death is the wages of sin. As sinners, we deserve to die. That is the proper terminus for our life of sin. Eternal life is the gift of God. We could never deserve it, earn it or qualify for it. It is the sovereign gift of God to those who believe the gospel. Romans 6:23 puts the two together: 'The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life.'

Now let us think about Acts 4:25-28. These verses look back to the prophetic statement in Psalm 2. Acts 4:25-26 are the fulfilment of Psalm 2:1-2. 'The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord,

and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together.' In other words, they put into operation a deliberate plan they themselves had previously made.

But Acts 4:28 says, 'For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done'. That is, while they are fully responsible to God for what they did, they could only go as far as God allowed them to go. But God used the very circumstance of their wicked act to bring about His own sovereign will.

The balance between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man is thus again highlighted. Those whom God has placed in a position of authority will have to give to God an account of their stewardship for their abuse of that power. Even then, God set a limit on what they in responsible conduct chose to do. This does not diminish in any way their responsibility to the God Who graciously allowed them to exercise that power. Romans 13:1-6 spells out this vital principle.

You know, the old illustration about railway lines is very apt. If we are standing between a pair of railway lines, and look down at our feet, there is quite clearly a specific distance between the two rails. However, if we look along the line into the distance, the two rails appear to come together. If we then walk along the line to the distant point we looked at from afar, we would find that the two rails were in fact as far apart as ever. Of course, if the distance between the two rails varied at all, the train would come off the rails, with tragic results. Each rail is distinct and essential to the safe transit of the passengers the train carries. So it is with the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man.

Let us remind ourselves that as long as we live, and whatever spiritual progress we might make, in ourselves we deserve nothing but judgment. We are sinners by nature and by practice. But let me emphasise this once more. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that God forces to believe the gospel any who do not want to believe it. Likewise, nowhere in the Bible does it say that God prevents from believing the gospel any who wish to believe. Scripture does not in any way or in any place support such views. Let me stress again! We are wise to accept personal responsibility for all our actions, our failures and our sins. We are equally wise to give the credit and the glory to God for all the blessing into which we have been brought.

Let us seek grace to be clear in our minds that there is no conflict, contradiction or confusion in what the Bible says. The sovereignty of God and our individual responsibility to Him for the choices we have freely made are clearly distinct. Let us exercise our freedom of choice in spiritual matters. In particular, let us be quite clear that we are responsible to God for the way in which we respond to His wonderful love in providing such a Saviour as His well beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us seek grace to so live that others, too, will be aware of their personal responsibility to God, personally for all their actions, thoughts, and words. Let us pray that they will believe in the Son of God and the value to God of the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. They will then be able to rejoice, with us, in the sovereign grace of God that made such a great salvation available to unworthy, guilty sinners like you and me.

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