

Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

Doctrines of Grace

I. Review & Introduction

A. The doctrines of grace answer how a person enters the Kingdom of God: God saves sinners

1. **We are sinners** – dead to God, hostile towards him, and, therefore, unable and unwilling to trust him for salvation (Eph. 2; John 3; Rom. 3, 8:7).
2. **God sovereignly chooses to show mercy and grace.**
 - a. **The Father elects** a people for himself and predestines them for salvation (Eph. 1, Rom. 8)
 - b. **The Son comes and atones** for their sins and purchases all the New Covenant promises for the elect, including a new heart to trust God (John 10:14-15, 26-28).
 - c. **The Spirit applies** the work of the Son to those whom the Father elected by making this new life and the faith that comes from it (Titus 3:5, John 3) so that when they hear the gospel, in God's timing, they will gladly repent and trust Jesus as Lord and be saved (1 Cor. 1:23-24, Rom. 8:28-33).
 - d. God will not lose any of those whom he saves, and they will persevere in faith (John 10:26-30).

B. How should we understand God's sovereignty and human responsibility/freedom?

1. Are these two things compatible?
2. If God is sovereign in salvation, are humans responsible for their choices and is God just?
3. In answering questions, we must always start with God's Word (not philosophy).

II. Election, Rightly Understood, Raises the Question of God's Justice

A. Our salvation is a result of God's sovereign choice (Romans 8:28-30, 9:11-13).

B. Is God unjust? No, but this is the question that will come if we properly teach this (Rom. 9:14-16).

III. Can God be Totally Sovereign and People be Responsible? Passages Showing the Compatibility of Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility¹

A. Egyptians giving the Israelites their stuff (Exodus 3:21-22)

B. Assyria's invasion of Israel (Isaiah 10:5-15)

C. Cyrus letting Israel return to rebuild the temple (Isaiah 44:28-45:4; Ezra 1:1)

D. Jesus' crucifixion (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28)

¹ This is taken from Bruce Ware, "The Compatibility of Determinism and Human Freedom," in *Whomever He Wills*. For an in-depth treatment of this topic, see Bruce Ware's book, *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith*.

IV. Defining Freedom Biblically (Philosophical Issues and Inferences)

A. Defining Freedom (two competing versions)

1. **Freedom of inclination or desire:** A decision or action is free if the person is acting according to his or her strongest inclination or desire at that moment.
2. **Libertarian freedom:** A decision or action is only free if at the moment a person makes a choice, he could have made a contrary choice. Nothing within or outside of the person constrains him to make choice A over choice B.

B. Libertarian freedom doesn't work

1. Philosophical objection: if there is nothing making you want A instead of B, how would you ever choose anything? Your reasons for selecting either would be non-existent.
2. Theological objection: you can't consistently hold to libertarian freedom and God's omniscience.
3. Biblical objection: libertarian freedom fails to adequately account for what we saw in the passages earlier.²

C. Freedom of inclination fits God's sovereign control

1. It deals with the *philosophical* concern over God's justice –he can be just and still be sovereign over our sinful choices because we are doing what we most desire based on our nature and the situations we are in.³
2. It fits with God's omniscience and with the biblical passages that show the compatibility of his total sovereignty with human responsibility.

V. Applying What We've Seen to Salvation

A. What is human nature like when it comes to relating to God?

1. Dead to God (Eph. 1, Rom. 3, John 3).
2. If that is true, what is our highest inclination? Can it ever be to believe in Jesus (1 Cor. 1:18, 2:14)?

B. If we are to believe, which we must believe to be saved, how can that happen?

1. He must give us new, spiritual life (Titus 3:5, Eph. 1, John 3).
2. He must give us a new nature so that we have new desires (Acts 16:14, 1 Thess. 1:4-5, 1 Cor. 1:18-24).

C. Those who end up in hell are fully responsible for their sin and unbelief. They are doing what they most want in continuing to disbelieve and rebel (1 Cor. 1:18).

² Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 88-89.

³ Bruce Ware gives a helpful illustration of a "sting operation," in which a situation is set up to allow a criminal to act according to his nature and desire without coercing the criminal into the illegal action (see Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 123-24).