# Talking About the Problem of Evil

*T.S. Weaver has put together an intellectual response to the problem of evil that includes a theology of evil and suffering, and a philosophical/theological series of proper defenses of God and His righteousness considering evil.*

## What is Evil?



The problem of evil is famous. This problem is personal because my wife stayed stuck as an agnostic for a long time. An agnostic, by the way, is a person who says they don't know if there is a God. Like so many people, she thought that if you believe in a God who is all good and all-powerful, then the presence of evil and suffering creates a problem.

Atheist philosopher David Hume said, "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able to but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"

Let's address this. I'll give you a roadmap of where we're going. First, we need to address how one can even object to evil. Second, I will talk about what evil is and is not. Then I will talk about some possible reasons God allows evil. Finally, I'll close with God's solution.

To start, if this challenge were raised by an atheist, we need to address the moral argument. If there is right and wrong, then they are grounded in the existence of a good and moral God. Because without an absolute Moral Law, which requires an absolute Moral Law Giver, the atheist has no grounds for a

complaint against evil.

Former atheist C.S. Lewis summarizes how this thinking eventually guided him to Christianity: “My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?”

Evil is not a “thing” that exists; and God is not the cause. Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas point out that evil is not a real entity in the world. This means evil is not a material or a phenomenon that exists by itself. It’s like darkness, which is not a created thing; it’s the absence of light. Evil describes a deficiency or denial of good. Philosophers call this deficiency a privation. Evil is what occurs once the good is altered or distorted. In Genesis 1 and 2, God told us all that existed was good. Evil was not an innovation, but a distortion. So, God is not the creator or author of evil.

## The Best-of-All-Possible-Worlds

Let us consider the best-of-all-possible-worlds argument. The place to start is God’s omniscience. This allows God to understand all possibilities. If God knows all possibilities, God knows all possible worlds. Since God is also completely good, He always wants and works out the best world and the best way.

Leibniz (the philosopher who came up with this defense) wrote, “The first principle of existences is the following proposition: God wants to choose the most perfect.”

The power of this argument is to show that out of every world that a good God could have produced, His decision to generate *this* one means this creation is good.

There are several principles that tie into this defense.

The first major principle is centered on the truth that God acts for worthy causes. Again, God's omniscience presumes that before God decides which world to produce, He understands the value of every possible world. This also implies God always decides on the base of sensible, stable rationales. This is called the "principle of sufficient reason."

To believe God can intercede in what he has formed with sufficient reason, even to avoid or restrict evil, would be like a soldier who abandons his post and knowingly allows enemy infiltration to instead stop a colleague from drinking while in uniform. The soldier ends up allowing a greater evil in order to stop a lesser evil.

Another principle that reinforces this argument is the principle of "pre-established harmony."

Leibniz describes it this way: "For, if we were capable of understanding the universal harmony, we should see that what we are tempted to find fault with is connected to the plan most worthy of being chosen; in a word we should see, and should not believe only, that what God has done is the best."

## Human Free Will

Above, we covered the principle of sufficient reason as part of the best-of-all possible worlds. The last principle of the best-of-all-possible-worlds is human free will. For Leibniz, this idea was just a principle in part of his greater defense. For Augustine, C.S. Lewis, and Alvin Plantinga it was an entire defense by itself. In its simplest form, it goes something like this: God set us up not to be machines but free agents with the power to choose.

If God were to make us capable of freely choosing the good, He had to create us also able to freely choose evil. Consequently, our free will can be misused and that is the explanation for evil.

Jean-Paul Sartre communicates this wonderfully: “The man who wants to be loved does not desire the enslavement of the beloved. . . . If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone.” God knows that a better world is created, if human beings are infused with free will, even if they decide to behave corruptly.

Were God to force us to make good choices, we would not be making choices at all, but simply implementing God’s instructions like when a computer runs a program.

For humans to have the capability to be ethically good, free will is necessary. Morality hangs on our capability to freely choose the good.

Plantinga asserts, “God creates a world containing evil, and he has a good reason for doing so.” John Stackhouse Jr. says, “God, to put it bluntly, calculates the cost-benefit ratio and deems the cost of evil to be worth the benefit of loving and enjoying the love of these human beings.”

Stackhouse sums up Plantinga’s argument like this:

“God desired to love and be loved by other beings. God created human beings with this in view. To make us capable of such fellowship, God had to give us the freedom to choose, because love, though it does have its elements of ‘compulsion,’ is meaningful only when it is neither automatic nor coerced. This sort of free will, however, entailed the danger that it would be used not to enjoy God’s love and to love God in return, but to go one’s own way in defiance of both God and one’s own best interest.”

God created us with free will because our decision to say “yes” to Him is only a real choice if we are also free to say “no” to Him.

## The Greater Good

To review, so far, we've addressed how one can even object to evil, in the moral argument. We've talked about what evil is and is not, and the idea of it being a privation. We've talked about some possible reasons God allows evil, which included the best-of-all-possible-worlds argument and the free will defense. Now I want to go over the greater good principle. While all the arguments I've given so far are intellectual and do not necessarily help with the emotional side of evil and suffering, this principle is especially delicate. I say "delicate" because this defense may not help a questioner much if they have been a victim of a seemingly very unwarranted evil, and/or if they are still carrying anger or bitterness.

Again, the topic we are examining is the greater good principle, which argues that certain evils are needed in the world for certain greater goods to happen. To put it another way, certain evils in this world are called for, as greater goods stem after them. For instance, nobody would believe a doctor who cuts out a cancerous tumor is being evil because he made an incision on the patient. The surgery incision is much less evil than letting the tumor develop. The greater good is the patient being cancer-free. Parents who penalize children for poor conduct with the loss of toys or privileges or even giving spankings are instigating pain (particularly from the kid's viewpoint). Although, without this discipline, the other possibility is that the kid will develop into a grownup with no discipline and would consequently face much more suffering. We do not understand in this world all the good God is preparing; therefore, we need to trust that God is good even when we can't see it and we can't understand the larger picture of what He's doing.

Plus, nearly all individuals will award some truth to the saying ascribed to Nietzsche: "Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger." Consequently, the principle of allowing pain in

the short term to bring about a greater contentment eventually is legitimate and one we know and use ourselves. That implies there is no mandatory contradiction between God and the reality of evil and suffering.

## The Cross

Finally, I end with the cross and the hope of Christianity. Jesus agonized in enduring the nastiest evil that can be thrown at him: denial by His own adored people; abhorrence from the authorities in His own religion; unfairness at the hands of the Roman court; unfaithfulness and disloyalty from His closest friends; the public disgrace of being stripped nude and mocked as outrageous "King of the Jews"; anguish in the agony of crucifixion; and the continuous weight of the lure to despair altogether, to crash these unappreciative beings with shocks of heaven, to recommence with a new race, to assert Himself. Instead, Jesus remained there, embracing into Himself the sins of the world, keeping Himself in position as His foes wreaked their most terrible treatment.

Our faith in a good God is sensible, because Jesus suffered on our behalf, and took the punishment we deserve. *He* understands what it is to suffer. *He* has lived there.

The cross was a world-altering occasion where the love and compassion of God dealt efficiently with the immensity of human sin. His death and resurrection show evil is trounced, and death has been slain. Contemplate the many implications of the atonement: Jesus is the Victor, He has paid our ransom, God's wrath has been satisfied, and Jesus is the substitution for the offenses we have perpetrated.

As if that is not enough, the Christian narrative ends with faith in the future where complete justice will be done, and all evils will be made right. When Christ returns, He will not once more give in to mortal agencies and quietly accept evil.

He will come back to deliver justice. The Bible's definitive solution to the problem of evil is that evil will be dealt with. God will create a new heaven and a new earth for persons God has loved so long and so well. This is the core of our faith in the middle of pain and suffering.

In conclusion, what I've just presented to you, and what my wife eventually figured out, is that evil is not a thing created by God. A valid complaint against evil cannot be made without the existence of God. God has plausible reasons for allowing evil. And He clearly has a plan to defeat it. All He wants you to do is trust Him.

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# The Best of All Possible Worlds?

*T.S. Weaver makes a case for 18th-century philosopher Leibniz's contention that this fallen world is still the best of all possible worlds.*

This world is just as embedded with pain and suffering as it is with beauty and joy. Can this world possibly be the best of all possible worlds?

18th-century philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz contended that it is.

In his book *Theodicy* (published in 1710{1}), he makes the very distinctive defense for the existence of God in view of the problem of evil.{2} ("Theodicy," combining the Greek words for God and justice, is the theological term for addressing the problem of how a good and just God can allow evil in His

creation.)

One of the strengths of Leibniz's theodicy is how straightforward and precise it is. It is also traditionally recognized as one of his highly essential contributions to philosophy of religion. The place to start is God's omniscience (not evil). This allows God to understand all possibilities. {3} If God knows all possibilities, God knows all possible worlds. God is likewise completely good and so constantly aspires the best and continuously performs in the best way. Leibniz writes, "The first principle of existences is the following proposition: *God wants to choose the most perfect.*" {4} The power of the best-of-all possible-worlds theodicy is to show God's decision to generate this world out of every world that he could have produced, *for this creation is good.*{5}

Leibniz ties in several principles to the theodicy. The first major principle is centered on the truth that God acts for worthy causes. Again, God's omniscience presumes God understands the value of every world possible prior to deciding which one to produce. This also implies God always decides on the base of sensible, stable rationales. This is called the "principle of sufficient reason."{6} Leibniz purports,

> Now this supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is no less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best. For a lesser evil is a kind of good, even so a lesser good is a kind of evil if it stands in the way of a great good; and there would be something to correct in the actions (so, the omnipotence) of God if it were possible to do better.{7}

To believe God can intercede in what He has formed with sufficient reason, even to avoid or restrict evil, would be akin to a soldier who abandons his post during a war to stop a colleague from perpetrating a slight violation.{8} In other words, when we sometimes think God should have restricted a

certain evil, the argument is that He could actually be guarding against a greater evil we are unaware of instead.

Leibniz does not leave the principle of sufficient reason to fend for itself. Instead, he reinforces the best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy with the principle of "pre-established harmony." He describes it this way: "For, if we were capable of understanding the universal harmony, we should see that what we are tempted to find fault with is connected to the plan most worthy of being chosen; in a word we *should see*, and should not *believe* only, that what God has done is the best." {9} In other words, God performs corresponding to divine perfection and liberty, decides to produce, commands creation corresponding to this nature, and then can choose a world that includes evil. Living in the best of all possible worlds entails the world comprising the best goods out of any, with the greatest harmony. Jill Graper Hernandez states, "The mere existence of humans in creation requires that humans may choose certain evil acts, and this is harmonious with God's perfection of intellect and will."{10}

This hints at the one last, ethical, principle of Leibniz's best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicy: God's creation includes human free will. For Leibniz, human freedom is vital to grasp how God's permission of evil is coherent with divine flawlessness and to grasp how God avoids ethical condemnation for letting evil into the best possible world.

> Free or intelligent substances possess something greater and more marvelous, in a kind of imitation of God. For they are not bound by any certain subordinate laws of the universe, but act by a private miracle as it were, on the sole initiative of their own power.{11}

A better world is created, if human beings are infused with free will, even if they decide to behave corruptly. While free will can ensue in evil (the risk), for humans to have the capability to be ethically good, or to build virtues, or to

develop spiritually, free will is necessary. Human ethical integrity hangs on our capability to freely choose the good. His generosity makes freedom conceivable and makes it possible for His creation to pursue Him. By wanting the best, God gives the prospect some creatures will decide to behave corruptly.

Yet, since its publication over three hundred years ago, Leibniz's theodicy has had enduring condemnation. Two of the most troubling are about the existence of "natural evil" (suffering from catastrophes in nature) and whether God could have formed a world with less powerful evils and less free will. The first is insidious because in most cases, seemingly only God could avoid natural catastrophes and the suffering that comes from them. Yet I think Leibniz would argue, given the understanding of his theodicy, we must trust that God has given us the best despite natural evils.

The second critique is obvious on its face to nearly everyone. One cannot help but wonder if this world is the best there could be, and if this is the best God could do. It appears there might be cases in which God should intercede to avoid suffering from atrocious evil, for example the Holocaust. As difficult as it is to accept, this critique interferes with the coherence of the principle of free will. This thinking does not declare we cannot *imagine* a world in which there is no Holocaust, or no evil at all. Even Leibniz concedes that point, but he argues, "It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness, and one could make some like Utopian romances: but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness."{12}

In summary, our world is the consequence of the merging of God's flawlessness and liberty, though the world includes flaws. Although this established world is not flawless, it is the best possible, and so it would be unfeasible for God to build a better world or to intercede in the world to avoid or restrict pain. A great God would produce only the best. Because this is the world God formed, this is the best. This

theodicy has stayed philosophically persuasive for several reasons, starting with its genuine logical and practical influence. The theodicy protects theistic flawlessness despite evil in the world because the problem of evil does not prove the theist keeps conflicting ideas that God is omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent and makes a world where his creatures morally fall. Additionally, Leibniz's theodicy protects free will, which is crucial for theists who think love and worship are needed to have freedom. This too is important for Leibniz to show God cannot be ethically responsible when people choose what is evil. Also, we understand the best of all possible worlds involves the ultimate extermination of sin and suffering (achieved through Christ's earthly work in the past and in His return and rule in the future).

Leibniz's theodicy proves the steadiness of God forever selecting the best with this world really being the best of all possible worlds, whilst meeting the atheist's challenge that a great God must be kept ethically accountable for the existence of evil. I argue the theodicy is helpful to inspire individuals to love God, to take solace from His divine providence and to urge them to use their free will to choose to pursue God. Leibniz magnifies this point:

> Whether one succeeds or not in this task, one is content with what comes to pass, being resigned to the will of God and knowing what he wills is best. When we are in this benevolent state of mind, we are not disheartened by failure, we regret only our faults, and the ungrateful way of men causes no relaxation in the exercise of our kindly disposition.{13}

Taking all this into account, we can trust God is giving us His very best with this world, and in our individual existential lives, even when we can imagine better circumstances or outcomes. This ought to give us a sense of peace and gratitude knowing our Heavenly Father is not giving

us the short end of the stick in any way. He loves us and cares for us. And that free will He gave us—if we are not using it to worship Him, we need to reconsider what we're using it for.

**Notes**

1. This was the first book-length philosophical consideration of this problem.
2. Jill Graper Hernandez, *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled with Pain*, ed. Chad Meister, James K. Dew Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 95.
3. Each possibility is a new sphere, or world, of possibility that varies from the world we presently occupy. A possible world comprises an extensive idea of God's intelligence that completely explains what could have happened if that world was generated (Jeffrey K. McDonough, "Leibniz: Creation and Conservation and Concurrence," Leibniz Review [2007], 33).
4. G.W. Leibniz, "On Freedom and Spontaneity," Academy ed., VI 4-b, 1454 in *The Shorter Leibniz Texts*, ed. Lloyd Strickland (New York: Continuum, 2006)
5. God describes everything He created as "good." See Genesis 1.
6. Hernandez, 100.
7. G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E.M. Huggard (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), II. 8.
8. Causa Dei, in *Leibniz: Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).
9. Leibniz, Theodiy, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E.M. Huggard (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), I. 44.
10. Hernandez, 101.
11. *On Necessity and Contingency*, in *Samtliche schriften und breife*, ser. VI, vol. 4 (Halle, Germany: Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1923), pp. 1449-50; "Philosophical Writings"), ed. G.H.R. Parkinson, trans. M. Morris (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), 100.
12. Leibniz, preface.

13. Ibid.

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# Defending Theism: A Response to Hume, Russell, and Dawkins

*T.S. Weaver looks at anti-God arguments from three prominent philosophers, showing why belief is God is more reasonable than their objections to His existence.*

Theism, broadly defined, is the belief in the existence of a supreme being or other deities. Believers in Jesus Christ would say we follow Christian Theism, believing in and trusting the one true God who has revealed Himself through His word and through His Son Jesus. In pursuit of the defense of theism and answering profound antagonists to the faith, I will engage with some of the objections raised by three prominent thinkers: David Hume, Bertrand Russell, and Richard Dawkins.

## David Hume

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher who is often considered the best philosopher to have written in the English language. Although he was wary of metaphysical things like God, he was very fascinated by religion. He is widely considered to be an atheist, but we do not know for certain whether he was atheist [one who denies that God exists], agnostic [one who is not sure if God exists], or deist [one who believes God created the universe but then let it run according to natural laws without divine intervention] by the time of his death. Regardless, his more prominent work is *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. In it he presents classical challenges to theism.

The strongest challenge to theism Hume presents in *Dialogues* is the problem of evil and God's moral nature. His view is that with the amount of evil in the world, we cannot consider God as morally sensible, morally great, and powerful. His assumption is that if God were to exist, He does not care to

solve the problem of good and evil. While this is the toughest intellectual challenge a theist has to answer, I believe there is an answer.

When God created, He gave humans the ability to make free decisions. If this ability were denied, our love (the supreme ethic) for Him would not be a choice and thus coerced. As a result, it would not be real love. Church Father Augustine (354-430) commented on this in his book *On the Free Choice of the Will*, by arguing that free will is what makes us human. God made us that way so we could freely choose to venerate, trust, and follow Him. So built into love, veneration, trust, and obedience was the ability to make free decisions. Consequently, certain choices are going to be terrible or evil (e.g., Adam and Eve's disastrous disobedience in the Garden of Eden). As a result, the only way to eradicate evil is to eradicate free will. Hence, evil is merely the consequence of the free will of humanity. John Stackhouse rearticulates this case:

> God desired to love and be loved by other beings. God created human beings with this in view. To make us capable of such fellowship, God had to give us the freedom to choose, because love, though it does have its elements of "compulsion," is meaningful only when it is neither automatic nor coerced. This sort of free will, however, entailed the danger that it would be used *not* to enjoy God's love and to love God in return, but to go one's own way in defiance of both God and one's own best interest. This is what the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden portrays.{1}

It is not that God is insensitive to evil (Proverbs 6:16, 15:26; Psalm 5:4), but that moral and natural evils are the cause of the sin (free choice to disobey God) of man.

## Bertrand Russell

Shifting gears, Bertrand Russell, (1872-1970) a famed agnostic philosopher, argued against theism with a famous view that everything on this globe is the result of "an accidental collocation of atoms."{2} Thus, there is no real aim for which we were produced. I believe this view is both incredibly depressing and incredibly wrong. If one were to take what Timothy Keller would call a "clue of God" like beauty and think this through, it would have serious implications. If this were true, as Keller put it in *The Reason for God,* "Beauty is nothing but a neurological hardwired response to particular data."{3} Conductor Leonard Bernstein once spoke of the effect of the beauty of Beethoven's music:

> Our boy has the real goods, the stuff from Heaven, the power to make you feel at the finish: Something is right in the world. There is something that checks throughout, that follows its own law consistently: something we can trust, that will never let us down.{4}

Does that sound like a "neurological hardwired response to particular data"? Or is Beethoven's music beautiful? As a seminary student, I often yearn for an excellent night of sleep. The thought is beautiful to me. Augustine in his *Confessions* argued that yearnings like this were clues to the existence of God. While my tiredness does not prove that my desire for an excellent night of sleep will happen tonight, it is correct that native yearnings like this link to actual substances that can fill them. For example, sensual yearning (linking to sex), hunger (linking to food), tiredness (linking to sleep), and interpersonal yearning (linking to relationship). We have a desire for joy, love, and beauty that no quantity or condition of sex, food, sleep, and relationship can satisfy. We hope for something that nothing on this globe can satisfy. Do you think this is a clue? I assert this unpleasing yearning is a deep-rooted native longing that is an

undeniable clue not only for the existence of God, but also that God is the only one who can satisfy that yearning. C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity,* "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."{5} (Please also see Dr. Michael Gleghorn's article "C.S. Lewis and the Riddle of Joy" at probe.org/c-s-lewis-and-the-riddle-of-joy/) Tying all this back to Russell's famous view, it makes sense that if there were a God who can satisfy that kind of yearning, this God likely made us, not by accident, but with a purpose. That is worth investigating.

## Richard Dawkins

Now I turn to Richard Dawkins (1941- ), who I think is best described as a militant atheist scientist. He writes in his book *The God Delusion*, describing God:

> The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.{6}

Tell us how you really feel, Dawkins. Although there is a lot said here, what is most obvious is his portrayal of God as immoral because of what God displayed of Himself in the Old Testament. These acts are perceived to undermine his morally perfect nature. Although this will not be my main response, I want to highlight that for Dawkins to grumble that God has perpetrated immoral acts, he acknowledges there is an objective moral law. In a separate argument, I could go from here to make the case that for there to be an objective moral law there must be an objective moral law giver (God). However, I instead want to concentrate on "the God of the Old Testament."

The Old Testament passage found in Deuteronomy (7:1-5; 20:16-18) tends to be the most cited in an argument against God such as Dawkins's quote above. In this passage, God instructed the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites living in a specific region: "[T]hen you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy" (7:2), and "[D]o not leave alive anything that breathes" (20:16). This passage bothers many (including myself) and may be an example of where Dawkins got his characterization. It is understandable to wonder how a good and loving God could instruct this.

To make sense of a tough passage like this one must understand the context, starting with who God is. God is not like any earthly ruler. He's not like Trump. He's not like Biden. He is Creator of all things and King of the Universe. That said, He supplies life, and He can take life when He chooses, however He chooses. The next step is to think through whether His instruction was justified (as if it were up to us to define justice). There are occasions when we as humans may feel it is justified for people to take another's life, as in self-defense, to safeguard others, or in a just war. What we must understand about the Canaanites in this passage is that this was not some illogical imperative for them to be murdered. The Canaanites were malevolent. In their obscene paganism, they were spiritually dangerous. They were unspeakably wicked. God said to the Israelites, "It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; *but on account of the wickedness of these nations*" (emphasis mine) (Deuteronomy 9:5).

The worst example of their wickedness is child sacrifice. Apologist Timothy Fox informs us, "They would burn their children alive in a fiery furnace as a sacrifice to the god Molech. Just that one act alone would be justification for their complete annihilation."{7} I wonder what Hume, who raised the problem of evil, would have to say to Dawkins about God dealing with and judging evil. One of the explanations God

provided for wrecking the Canaanites was so that Israel would not embrace their malevolent ways. Dawkins may still object though and say, “What about the kids? How could a loving God instruct the Israelites to destroy harmless kids?” I do find this troubling as well, but as shown above, God can take life when He chooses, however He chooses. No one is promised a lengthy, peaceable life and to perish of old age. Furthermore, what if God saw that if these children were to mature, they would be just as evil and corrupt as their parents? What if ordering the death of children infected by their parents’ wickedness is similar to an oncology surgeon cutting out small cancer cells along with the full-grown cells? That is a possibility. In addition, God does not appreciate the murder of the evil but patiently waits for repentance of sins (Ezekiel 18:23). In the case of the Canaanites, we see He will only allow wickedness for so long though.

Another objection Dawkins has to the existence of God is science. His view is that you can either be scientific and sensible, or religious. He is either ignoring, or ignorant of, the fact that modern science arose out of a biblical worldview. Christians are responsible for developing the scientific perspective and method. Francis Bacon, astronomers Kepler and Galileo, and the brilliant mathematician and physicist Isaac Newton all believed in God. They all helped shape the development of modern science; they believed that since God was a God of order, they expected nature to be orderly. They also understood that one man’s opinion could be faulty because of sin, and therefore others needed to verify what any one scientist said. Kepler even characterized his scientific perspective as “thinking God’s thoughts after Him.”

Dawkins thinks God and science do not mix. Yet two legendary experiments performed in 1916 and 1997 reveal this view is not as widely held as Dawkins and others make it seem. In 1916, American psychologist James Leuba conducted a study asking scientists if they believed in a God who actively communicates

with humanity, no less than via prayer. 40 percent confirmed they did, 40 percent confirmed they did not, and 20 percent were not confident either way. Edward Larson and Larry Witham duplicated this study in 1997 using identical queries with scientists. They discovered the figures had not altered substantially. Even atheist philosopher Thomas Nagle disagrees with Dawkins's view of reality. Nagle even questions whether atheist naturalists think their moral instincts (yes morality has come up again), for example the belief that genocide is morally incorrect, are true instead of just the consequence of neurochemistry hardwired into humans. He writes:

> The reductionist project usually tries to reclaim some of the originally excluded aspects of the world, by analyzing them in physical—that is, behavioral or neurophysiological—terms; but it denies reality to what cannot be so reduced. I believe the project is doomed—that conscious experience, thought, value, and so forth are not illusions, even though they cannot be identified with physical facts.{8}

Science *cannot* explain all and *can* be consistent with religious faith. Therefore, it is unreasonable to think that an individual can only be a believer of science *or* a believer of God. It is also irrational to believe we came into the world by accident, or that because of the presence of evil in the world theism is not workable. In short, it is more reasonable to believe in theism than not to.

## Notes

1. J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), 552.
2. Bertrand Russell, "The Free Man's Worship," The Independent Review 1 (Dec 1903), 415-24 Title of essay changed after 1910 to "A Free Man's Worship."
3. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Penguin

Books, 2016), 138.
4. From Leonard Bernstein's "The Joy of Music" (Simon and Schuster, 2004), 105.
5. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity,* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 105.
6. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2006), 51.
7. crossexamined.org/god-behaving-badly-destruction-canaanites/, accessed March 31, 2022.
8. Thomas Nagel, "The Fear of Religion," The New Republic (October 23, 2006).

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# Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life. Like It or Not.

Recently I have been engaging in an email conversation with a lady who is deeply burdened by the sinful choices and ungodly thinking of a young man dear to her. As we have talked about what she can do, our conversation turned to prayer. Yesterday she asked, “How does intercessory prayer make/change/mediate the young man’s own will? How does the person we pray for ‘get the message’? How can we pray for God’s will to be done when it is against the will of the person we’re praying for? How does our prayer help the person to *want* God’s will for themselves? How does my intercessory prayer help the person I’m praying for yield their own will and turn it over to God’s will?”

I answered, “You’re asking about the mechanics of how something spiritual works, and I don’t know that the Word gives us that kind of information. But think about how *you* have changed *your* thinking about anything. How did you go from being dead in your trespasses and sins, to being alive in Christ? How did you go from caring more about yourself than anyone else (because sinful humanity is inherently selfish) to having a desire to pray selflessly for others?

“I would suggest that God gave you enlightenment, showing you more and more truth, at the same time drawing you into His own heart. You started gravitating toward what was true, and Jesus said, ‘I am the truth.’

“At the same time, God never violated your will, allowing you to freely choose to turn to Him in faith and in choices that matured you. How those work together, I don’t think anyone understands.”

Ah. Mystery. We keep running into it, don’t we? And that makes

sense, since God is so other, so immense, so brilliant—do we really expect that we would be able to figure out how the spiritual realm works, much less figuring out God Himself? But with our modernist, Western, scientific mindset, we are set up to disdain mystery (and all things supernatural). The progression of scientific knowledge and understanding has stripped the apparently mystical and miraculous from things like how babies are conceived and how illness spreads. Our culture's misplaced confidence in science to solve all problems extends to mystery; we tend to think, "Oh, we just haven't figured it out yet. . .but we will."

We want to know *how things work*, and there's nothing wrong with that. I think that wrestling with that question is one way we can love God with our minds (Matt. 22:37). But there are also going to be times to choose to be content with mystery, and let it serve its role of pointing us to the One who delights to weave mystery into life like a divine tapestry.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/ah_sweet_mystery_of_life._like_it_or_not.
on Aug. 2, 2011.

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# "What's the Difference Between God's Will and Man's Will in Salvation?"

**What is the difference between God's will and man's will in salvation? When someone chooses to believe in the Lord, do**

**they believe by their own will or by God's will? The Bible says, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight…" (Ephesians 1:4).**

I think that (in a sense) both wills are involved when someone trusts Christ for salvation. God's will is primary and the human will is secondary. God desires all men to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4) and He provides sufficient grace for each person to be saved. Hence, when someone trusts Christ for salvation, they are not doing this on their own initiative or in their own will-power. Rather, they simply quit resisting God's grace and allow Him to save them. Those who persist in resisting God's grace will ultimately perish.

Thus, as one Christian theologian has observed, the difference between believers and unbelievers is NOT to be found in the believers; it is to be found in the unbelievers. The believer is one who simply allows God to save him (which is God's will and desire); the unbeliever is one who continues to resist God's grace.

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

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# "If Those Who Can't Choose God Go to Heaven, Why Give Us a Choice?"

**I read at Probe.org some of the answers to the question of whether babies are in heaven, and they still did not answer my**

**question—IF the mentally retarded and infants are in heaven because of God's grace (before I go on, please don't think I am being disrespectful, because I love the Lord), then why did He create US with choice? Will the babies be grown up in Heaven and the formerly mentally retarded be complete? If so, how can God have a perfect relationship with them, if they have never been given a choice to choose against Him, like we were? Why didn't He just make us all that way?**

Thanks for the question. Sorry to hear that the other articles didn't cover it for you, but your question is one that has no easy "one-size-fits-all" answer.

As earlier established, it is by God's grace that babies, and those too mentally handicapped to make a choice for or against Christ, go to heaven. One of the rationales for that belief is Jesus' descriptions of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus used illustrations of children to highlight the kind of character that would be present in heaven. In Matthew 18:1-4, Jesus tells about the humility found in children that serves as a guiding principle for all who wish to enter eternal paradise of God. In Mark 10:13-16, Jesus described the sincere faith and genuine trust necessary for those who are in heaven. He asserted that children have a recognized place in the kingdom (Matthew 18:10) for they (and by extension, the mentally challenged who cannot progress beyond a child-like mentality) illustrate the kind of spirit an adult must have to experience a place in God's kingdom{1}.

Granted, deceased children and the mentally challenged do not have the option of belief; their development ended before the age of accountability where they could make a mature decision of trust{2}. However, Christ died for all (Romans 6:10); the debt of sin was paid in full once and for all (1 Peter 3:18). Unless someone deliberately rejects that offer of grace, the offer still stands. Children and the mentally challenged cannot believe nor disbelieve, therefore they have not rejected Christ's atonement. The cancelled debt of sin is

still valid on their account.

But, I think I understand the core of your question. It seems that you are asking this: why do babies, children, and the mentally challenged get a “free pass” to heaven without having to go through the angst and struggle that comes from the life of faith? Why do they get to go to heaven scot–free while adults have to struggle with the issue of choice and the resulting dilemma of eternal damnation?

Every human being is born with the potential of choice. It’s in our DNA. It’s a part of being human. Babies, children, the mentally challenged–all of us were born with the capacity for choice and free will. When those who cannot believe die, the full potentiality of their choice is cut short and they cannot fully exercise that capacity. They do not have any accountable works to speak against their character, therefore God ushers them into His presence. It may seem that it would be preferable to simply die as a child to assure one’s place in heaven. But we must remember two things: First, as humans in the image of God, we were created for more than just heaven. If we were created simply for heaven, we would not have physical bodies, nor would we be resurrected in bodily form. Our created purpose was to be a physical representation of God’s presence on the earth. Second, there is a trade–off in the premature death of a baby versus the full life of an adult. Babies and the mentally challenged do not have to experience the angst of choice and the struggles of faith but they also miss out on earthly life itself. A full earthly life can include the joy of a family and the shared happiness that comes from strong lifelong friendships. Adults have the opportunity to find and experience love on many different levels: platonic, fraternal, casual, romantic, and spiritual. Those who are Christians share in the fellowship of their spiritual family and are indwelled with the filling of the Holy Spirit.

People past the age of accountability do have the eternally

crucial decision of choosing rightly of whether to follow Christ or not. They have supernatural assistance from God in the power of the Holy Spirit. In deliberation with our free will, God is there to assist us in our choice and interacts with our spirits to help us make an informed decision (John 16:8-11). Though the choice can be difficult for some, God illuminates the truth and testifies to our spirit that Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:9-11).

Finally, we simply cannot argue with how God decides to give his grace. The classic example is the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), where some of the workers were angry with the justice of the landowner . A landowner decided to hire workers to work in his vineyard, so he hired help throughout the day. The workers who were hired at the end of the day did not work that long, yet they were paid a denarius (a full day's salary). The workers hired in the early morning sweated and toiled in the heat, yet they too were paid a denarius. Those who bore the brunt of the labor grumbled against the landowner and asked why those who performed less labor received the same payment as those who worked all day.

The analogy holds for babies and the mentally challenged. Babies and the mentally challenged have not made a profession of faith or lived a life of struggle against sin and temptation. Nor have they had to face the real possibility of hell, yet they are ushered through the gates of heaven. Adult believers have the task of coming to trust in Jesus and obeying the will of the Father, or face the possibility of eternal condemnation.

The landowner's response to the hired men is the same response that our Father gives us. This is not an occasion for anger or jealousy but an opportunity for grace. God wants to extend his mercy to all and we should be happy with the reward set before us. We should not be envious that those who cannot believe get to experience the same honor as those who have borne the scars of struggles and difficulties. We should celebrate because we

know that those individuals – the babies, the children, and the mentally challenged- are in a better place and are safe in the arms of our Lord when they die.

You asked why God created us with choice. You may find this answer to email helpful: "Why Did God Create a Flawed World Where Eve Could Eat the Forbidden Fruit?"

I hope that answers your question.

Nathan Townsie

**Notes**

1. Lightner, Robert P. *Safe in the Arms of Jesus: God's Provision for Death for Those Who Cannot Believe*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000.

2. The age of accountability was the age that God considered a person to be morally responsible for his/her own behavior. In Jewish culture, age thirteen was the age that a person was considered to be a full member of the community and thus responsible for his/her sins. In Christendom, there is no definitive age; it is left to the discretion of the Lord.

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# "Which Is It: Man's Free Will or God's Omniscience?"

**A friend of mine posed this question to me. I would like to pass it along for your reflection:**

> ***When we say that God "knows the future", are we saying that He possesses knowledge of all future events? My premise is***

> ***that in order for free will for Man to exist, then it is impossible for God to know all future events. In other words, these concepts are mutually exclusive. If that is true, then which one exists – free will in humans, or knowledge by God of all future events? (Or is my premise wrong?) My opinion is that free will exists, and therefore God cannot know all future events. Furthermore, Christians should not be troubled by the concept of a God that does not possess knowledge of all future events. They should rest assured that – one way or another – He will execute His plan and carry out His promises.***

**Thanks for any insights that I could pass along to him.**

This is a big issue in theological circles today—sort of the "God version" of the "what did he know and when did he know it?" question. The debate over the extent of God's foreknowledge is called "open theism." (Check out Rick Wade's article called "God and the Future").

But I can tell you what we believe. God does, indeed, know every single detail of the future, which is why the Bible contains accurate prophecy of future events—because not only did God know they would (and will) happen, but because He is sovereign, He superintends them.

I think many people misunderstand the concept of "free will," which is not a biblical term. The reality is that while we have the ability to make truly significant choices, we don't have truly "free" will. You cannot, for example, choose to wake up tomorrow morning in China when you go to bed in Chicago. Or wake up speaking Chinese when all you know is English. You cannot choose to be a different gender than what God made you. (Yes, I'm aware of sex-change operations and know people who've had them—we're not even going there! <smile>) But we can make choices that make a difference: for example, in our attitudes, in who we marry and most

importantly, which God we serve. We have limited freedom in our choices, and God does not force us to choose things His way; He respects our choices. But we do not have totally free will.

I think your friend misunderstands the concept of God's sovereignty ("one way or another – He will execute His plan and carry out His promises") if he thinks that God can have a plan and execute it if He doesn't know everything that's going to happen. You can't have it both ways. A God who is not omniscient cannot be sovereign. A sovereign God MUST be omniscient.

Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

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# "Who Controls the World—God or Satan?"

**A friend and I were discussing whose rule the world was under, God's or Satan's. Of course we disagreed because I said God ruled the world and allows Satan to take us through suffering to make us strong and to test our faith. My friend feels that the world belongs to Satan because Eve succumbed to Satan in the Garden of Eden. Please clarify who controls the world today.**

Thanks for your letter. Satan has been temporarily granted a tremendous amount of power over this world, as can be seen from the following passages:

*John 12:31 – Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler*

> *of this world will be cast out.*
>
> *2 Cor 4:4 – …in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*
>
> *1 John 5:19 – We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.*

But God is the One who ultimately rules and reigns over all things. He is the Creator of all that exists (other than Himself of course) and all things are ultimately subject to His will and power. Many passages of Scripture bear this out – e.g. Psalms 9:7; 22:28; 47:8; 59:13; 66:7; 97:1; 99:1; 103:19; 146:10, as well as passages such as Gen. 1-2; Job 1-2; John 1; Eph. 1; Col. 1; Rom. 9-11; Rev. 19-22; etc.

Satan is a creature; God is his Creator. Satan cannot do anything that the Lord does not permit him to do (see Job 1-2) and God will one day cast Satan into the lake of fire for all eternity (Rev. 20:10).

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

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# "Which Is It: Man's Free Will or God's Omniscience?"

**A friend of mine posed this question to me. I would like to pass it along for your reflection:**

> *When we say that God "knows the future", are we saying that He possesses knowledge of all future events? My premise is that in order for free will for Man to exist, then it is impossible for God to know all future events. In other words, these concepts are mutually exclusive. If that is true, then which one exists – free will in humans, or knowledge by God of all future events? (Or is my premise wrong?) My opinion is that free will exists, and therefore God cannot know all future events. Furthermore, Christians should not be troubled by the concept of a God that does not possess knowledge of all future events. They should rest assured that – one way or another – He will execute His plan and carry out His promises.*

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<smile>) But we can make choices that make a difference: for example, in our attitudes, in who we marry and most importantly, which God we serve. We have limited freedom in our choices, and God does not force us to choose things His way; He respects our choices. But we do not have totally free will.

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Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

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# The Sovereignty of God

*Rick Wade helps us understand the full meaning of the sovereignty of God highlighting its immense practical importance. If God is truly sovereign, then what He says He will do, He can and will bring to pass. It is the choice of our sovereign God to endow us with free will and as sovereign He can make it so without limiting His sovereign power. God has promised us a glorious future and He has the power and the resolve to make it happen.*

*This article is also available in Spanish.* 

## What's the Issue?

In whom or in what do people place their trust these days? Money? Their social group? Themselves? Some use exercise to improve their physical, mental, and emotional well-being and maybe even add years to their lives. Some look to spiritual practices, or work for a safer environment. Such things have their proper place, but should they be our source or sources of confidence? We all live with a basic insecurity that causes us to look for something stable to hold onto. It is obvious that there are forces in this world stronger than we are, some of which have no concern for our welfare. So we latch on to something that will see us through whatever problems might come our way.

Although Christians are to attend to their financial, physical, and social welfare (among other things), they are look to God ultimately for their security. We're derided by some for seeking a "crutch" or a "security blanket," but everyone looks for support in one place or another. The question is, Which crutch or security blanket is true and sufficient for our needs? Christians look to the true God Who has promised to be our "help in times of trouble."

Because of our different personalities and situations in life, we look for different things in God. What do you want in a God? What do you need in a God? Love? Justice? Mercy? No matter what we might need in a God, if that God lacks one particular thing, the others will do little good. That is the power to "pull it off," to exercise His love, justice, and mercy, and to do all the things He says He will do without opposition powerful enough to deter Him. We need our God to be sovereign; to be, as Arthur Pink said, "the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purpose, or resist His will."{1}

Often when the subject of God's sovereignty comes up among

Christians, it's in the context of the sovereignty/free will debate. Although I will address that matter at a later point, my desire is that we will see the sovereignty of God as a foundation for confidence rather than simply a topic for debate.

God's sovereignty has immense practical importance. For one thing, it makes Him our proper object of worship. He is the almighty, omnipotent God, the creator and sustainer of all that exists. There is none higher, none more worthy of worship and honor.

For another thing, that God is sovereign means He can be counted on, for nothing can stand against Him. He can be counted on for our salvation. He can be counted on to carry us through times of difficulty such that nothing touches us that is not in keeping with His desires for us. And He can be counted on to keep all the promises He has made to us.

## Characteristics of Sovereignty

What does the Bible say about God that causes us to believe He is sovereign? For one thing, God is called by names that convey the meaning of sovereignty. In the Old Testament, He is called *Adonay*. Second Samuel 7:22 in the NIV reads: "How great you are, O Sovereign Lord! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears." In the New Testament, God is called *despotēs*, from which we get our word "despot." This word "denotes the lord as owner and master in the spheres of family and public life." The term is usually used over against the word *doulos* or "slave."{2} In Rev. 6:10 we read where those slain for their testimony "called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'"

Another thing we see in Scripture is that God has characteristics that call for ascribing sovereignty to Him.

First, God exercises rightful *authority*. He has the right to do with the creation what He desires because it is His creation. He also is active in His creation, contrary to the deistic understanding which is that God created the universe but then left it to run according to natural laws with little or no intervention on His part.

Second, God has the *power* to do what He desires with His universe. “All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing,” Daniel wrote. “He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: What have you done?'” (4:35).

Third, God has the *knowledge* required to rule over all. He knows what’s going on, and exactly what needs to be done. He knows the past, present, and future perfectly.

Fourth, God has the *will* to do what He desires. He does what He says He will do. (Is. 46:9, 10; 55:11)

## Biblical Examples

These attributes are seen in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, for example, God showed His sovereignty in the experience of Moses and the Israelites in the exodus from Egypt. He showed His *authority* when He simply stepped in and told Moses what He would do for His people and later when He overrode Pharaoh’s ruling and showed who was really in charge. He demonstrated His *power* by turning Moses’ staff into a serpent; by making Moses’ hand leprous and then healing it; through sending the plagues upon the Egyptians; and then by parting the sea before the fleeing Israelites. “By this you shall know that I am the LORD,” He said (Ex. 7:17). God had perfect *knowledge* of the plight of the Israelites (3:7, 9), and He knew what He would do with and for them (3:12, 19, 20, 22). Finally, He was faithful to His promises; His *will* was not thwarted.

God showed His sovereign rule in the New Testament as well in the experience of Mary. He showed His *authority* over this young woman when He simply stepped into her life and told her what He was going to do (Lk. 1:26ff). He claimed to have the *power* to do what He desired: "For nothing will be impossible with God," said the angel (v. 37). God *knew* Mary (v. 30), and He knew what her future held because He had plans for Her (vv. 31, 35). And He faithfully fulfilled His promises, according to His *will*, as Mary knew He would (1:42; 2:6, 7; see also her exclamation of praise in 1:49-55).

These are only two of numerous illustrations of the sovereign authority of God in Scripture. We can read about similar demonstrations in the lives of other people such as Job (Job 38-41; 42:2), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:31, 32, 34-35), Joseph (Gen. 50:20), and Jesus (Acts 2:23, 24). And that's just a small sampling.

But God's sovereign rule didn't end with the writing of the Bible. The God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever is still sovereignly active in His creation. God is "the only Sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords" who will draw history as we know it to a close with the coming of Christ "at the proper time" (1 Tim. 6:15). He determines the times and boundaries of nations (Acts 17:26). Not only did He create all things, Paul writes that "in Him all things hold together" (Col. 2:17). Notice the present tense in Eph. 1:11 which says that God is the one "who works all things after the counsel of His will."

## Sovereignty and Free Will

The problem of the tension between God's sovereign control and man's free will is a perennial one among Christians, especially theology students! While this is an interesting debate (to some), it easily overshadows any discussion of the benefits of God's sovereignty. Battle lines are drawn and the

debate commences, with the result that sovereignty becomes a matter of contention rather than one of comfort. Nonetheless, it seems inappropriate to ignore the issue in a discussion of sovereignty. So I'll offer just a few comments, not to attempt to settle the issue, but to bring a few points to light for you the reader to consider.

From our previous discussion, we already have a basic understanding of what sovereignty is. What about free will? Note that here we aren't talking about the freedom that comes when we are released from the power of sin through faith in Christ. According to Scripture, we are enslaved to whichever master we choose to follow. But to be "enslaved" to Christ is to be free to be and do what we were made to be and do.

We're talking here about freedom of the will, the ability to choose or determine one's actions without coercion. Because one's actions are so strongly influenced by one's upbringing, religious beliefs, circumstances of life, etc., our situation can never be one of complete indeterminacy. {3} Thus, the issue at hand doesn't pit completely free will against God's control. It really is over our ability to make uncoerced, significant choices for which we can be held responsible: it is about God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

Just as we read of a God in control of the history of His creation throughout Scripture, we also observe people making choices for which they are either rewarded or punished. It seems clear enough in Scripture that we are able to make uncoerced choices. Jesus bewailed the condition of Jerusalem in His day: "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings," He said, "and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37). The Jews are blamed for their choice—or lack of it. We're even commanded to make choices: "Choose this day whom you will serve," Joshua commanded (24:15). Jesus told us to "repent and believe the gospel" (Mk. 1:15) as if we could choose to do so. Abraham received what God had promised because he chose to obey God

(Gen. 22:15-18).

But if we have this freedom to choose, how can God be truly sovereign over the course of history? What a conundrum!

One principle that absolutely must remain paramount is that Scripture is our final authority, not reason. This isn't to say the scriptural position is against reason; it's merely an affirmation that our reason is not up to fully grasping God and His ways. We have to make do with what He tells us; all speculation beyond that is merely—well, speculation.

What do we read in the Bible? We read that both God is in control and that we can be legitimately held responsible for our choices. And we don't have to find one verse in support of one and another verse in support of the other! In Gen. 50: 20, Joseph said to his brothers who sold him into slavery, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." Peter rebuked the Jews at Pentecost: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men," he said (Acts 2:23). That the executioners bore at least some of the guilt is clear from the fact that Jesus asked for their forgiveness on the cross (Lk. 23:34). In Isaiah we read that it was God who sent the Assyrians to punish Judah, but then punished them for doing it with the wrong attitude (10:5-15)!

This issue typically arises in discussions of the matter of election to salvation. Jesus and the apostles made the offer as though listeners (or readers) could accept it or reject it. God doesn't play games; it would make the whole call to repentance and salvation a farce if our choice had nothing to do with it. We're told to "repent and believe in the Gospel," (Mk. 1:15). But we're also told that it is God who chooses (cf. Jn. 15:16; Rom. 9:14-22).

This duality is also seen in our prayer life. We're taught

that all things come to pass according to God's will, but also that our prayers make a difference. Paul said that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). But through Ezekiel God said, "I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it, but I found none. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them" (22:30, 31). Someone might say that it is God who inclines us to pray, but that doesn't diminish the fact that we can be scolded for not praying as though the responsibility were ours to do so (James 4:2).

People who spend much time thinking about this matter tend to lean more heavily to one side than to the other. It's important to note, however, that we do not lose a bit of tension by emphasizing one over the other—either God's sovereignty or man's free will. If we overemphasize God's sovereignty, there is the difficulty of understanding the judgment of God of those who weren't elected.{4} How does this mesh with the scriptural teaching that God doesn't show favoritism, or to the command to love all people, even our enemies? On the other hand, if we overemphasize man's free will, how can a man ever be saved? "An excessively narrow Arminianism," says Mark Hanna, "lapses into synergism (the union of human effort or will with divine grace)." It diminishes the enslaving power of sin, and it gives us the power to limit God. {5}

Because of these tensions, I'm inclined to agree with Donald Carson who says that "the sovereignty-responsibility tension is not a problem to be solved; rather it is a framework to be explored."{6} It is an issue that I personally have had to let stand without any real hopes for final resolution. Some might consider this an "easy out," but I'm content to see this as one of the "secret things" spoken of in Dt. 29:29.

However, that doesn't mean the matter of God's sovereignty isn't important. As I see it, the important question is, How

shall I live with both biblical truths in view: that God is sovereign over all, and that I will be held responsible for my choices? I think the old hymn “Trust and Obey” sums it up. I have been given the responsibility to obey God. But I’m thankful that the final burden of accomplishing His will doesn’t rest on me! For that, I am to trust Him. This is the crux of the sovereignty-responsibility issue as far as I’m concerned. While we have the ability and responsibility to choose, we can have confidence that God’s plan will be accomplished, that His promises will be fulfilled, and that in the end, everything is going to turn out just right.

## The Significance of Sovereignty for Our Lives

Let’s wind up this brief overview with a look at some applications of God’s sovereignty in our lives.

First, that God is sovereign makes clear who is to be the focus of our worship. All glory goes to Him. To Jesus “be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen,” John said (Rev. 1:6). “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (5:12) the angels sang. When we worship individually and corporately, our eyes should be on the sovereign God rather than on ourselves. Although we will share in the glories of Christ (Rom. 8:17; 2 Thes. 2:14; 1 Pet. 5:1), God will not give His glory away to another (Is. 42:8; 48:11). He is the One who should get all the credit.

That God is sovereign means that God’s redemptive purposes will not be thwarted. He will build His church (Matt. 16:18), and we can know we are part of it. Nothing can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:38-39).

It also means that all God has foretold will surely come to pass. He is working out His plans (Is. 42:5-9), and nothing

will take away what God has for us. No one can hold back His hand (Dan. 4:35). He is able to keep His promises, and because He is true to His word, He can be counted on to keep them (Is. 55:11; 2 Tim. 2:13; cf. Rev. 3:14; 21:5; 22:6).

In addition to that, because the sovereign God is also the God of love, He can be trusted in the fullest sense. The awesome power of God is a fearful thing to His enemies (Matt. 10:28; Heb. 10:31). But to those who love Him, the combination of His sovereignty and love makes it possible for us to truly rest, to live without fear. This is in stark contrast to gods of other religions who constantly have to be appeased to avert their anger, or even to the gods of our secular society, such as money, power, health, and prestige, all of which can let us down.

Finally, that God is sovereign means He will ultimately triumph over evil. We're told that in the end the great enemy death will be done away with (1 Cor. 15:26, 54, 55). "He will wipe every tear from their eyes," John writes. "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Rev. 21:4).

Earlier I noted that the topic of God's sovereignty easily becomes a matter of contention rather than one of comfort. Just as the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints should serve to bring comfort to those who sometimes doubt their ability to hold on to God, the doctrine of sovereignty should serve to comfort those who fear, to encourage those who understand clearly their own limitations, and to provide a counter to the pessimism of our day. While being fully aware of the futility of the course of this world, we should still be optimistic people, because God has promised us a glorious future, and He has the power and resolve to make it happen.

**Notes**

1. A.W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker,

1982), 19.
2. Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), s.v. "Lord, Master," by H. Bietenhard.
3. *Webster's New World College Dictionary,* 4th ed., s.v. "free will." See also Dagobert D. Runes, ed. Dictionary of Philosophy (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v. "Free-will," by Ledger Wood.
4. Mark M. Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 60.
5. Hanna, 59.
6. D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1994), 2.

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