

**God's Sovereignty and the Free Will of Man: An Examination of Scripture in Light of the  
Calvinist and Arminian Debate**

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## **Introduction**

Much has been made about the balance in Scripture of the sovereignty of God and human responsibility as it relates to salvation. Calvinism in general emphasizes the sovereignty of God in salvation, whereas Arminianism generally highlights the responsibility of man to respond to God's call to salvation. Paramount in this discussion is the interpretation of key passages that demonstrate both the sovereignty of God and the free will of man, some of which are John 3, Romans 9, and Ephesians 2. The most challenging aspect of this discussion is the extent of God's divine will and the intersection of man's responsibility with it. In such an impassioned debate it can be difficult to set aside fervent emotion, especially because of the implications one's conclusions will have on life and ministry. What must remain in focus is that there is an all-gracious God who has decided to save sinful humanity and has made a way possible for that to happen in Christ Jesus. This is the core of the gospel and the most important message anyone could hear.

Whether Calvinist or Arminian in persuasion, or neither, this must remain the focus the debate, a reality that most can find as common ground. Nevertheless, the particulars of salvation must be examined as passages are dissected, and there are two paradoxical teachings in Scripture that humanity has long struggled to understand: a sovereign God and a creation with its own will. How do the two coincide? While many ascribe to the tenets of either Calvinism or Arminianism, this paper will explore three key passages (Jn 3; Rom 9; Eph 2, English Standard Version) and their presentations of both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. Scripture teaches that both principles exist, and it teaches both without necessarily resolving the apparent tension that arises in their coexistence.

## Predestination and Divine Election

Regarding predestination, Calvinists emphasize passages that present the idea of predestination (Eph 1:5, 1:11; Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 2:7), or God's choosing to save particular individuals from eternity past. This is a divine choice of God to elect certain individuals to salvation, and because of man's fall it is essential that God draws people to salvation.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, Enns notes the general idea that leads to this necessary choosing, because there remains not one ounce of man in his fallen state able to choose God, and this is the intersection of predestination/election with total depravity.<sup>2</sup> Scripture is clear: God chooses and there is such thing as the elect (see the above references, which are a short selection of many more). Even while some theologians say Calvinists live with the Scriptural presentation of sovereignty and human responsibility as "a divine paradox,"<sup>3</sup> their teachings reflect anything but this conclusion. Even with a more moderate Calvinist holding of freedom of man there are vestiges that do not completely put responsibility of response to God's call of salvation in man's hands.<sup>4</sup> So while some may say there is a paradoxical presentation of divine will and human will, the ultimate conclusion from even the moderate Calvinists present evaluations that say precisely the opposite. In such an either/or conversation it seems disingenuous to claim aenigma when there are presumably answers for everything in the sovereignty of God.

How is it that God may give man responsibility in every area of decision, and yet he also "determines the result of all people, events, and things"<sup>5</sup>? In one sense, there must be a choice

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, ed. Jim Vincent and Allan Sholes (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 514.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 519.

<sup>4</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 328.

<sup>5</sup> Enns, *Moody Handbook*, 514.

between two sides in this seeming paradox: either man has responsibility, but it is determined by God (thus not really a responsibility at all), or God is both sovereign and man is still responsible. Calvinists have opted for the former, but Scripture presents the latter.

### **Divine Reprobation**

Moderate Calvinists will affirm the supposition that God has elected some to salvation, but they reject the notion that God selects the remainder for eternal damnation. Even so, there remains a contingent who believe that this is the case scripturally. Calvin reluctantly accepted this as a teaching of Scripture<sup>6</sup>, though his protégé Theodore Beza embraced and expanded upon Calvin's teaching, making double predestination a major emphasis in general, proposing what came to be known as supralapsarianism.<sup>7</sup> Supralapsarianism appears to be the logical companion to divine election, but this concept is not explicitly taught anywhere in Scripture (though some will point to Romans 9). Romans 9:22 does speak of God's choice to prepare objects for destruction, but this is presented as a hypothetical question in the context of Israel's rejection of God.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the passages that teach election present the concept only in a salvific context, intending for election to be a comfort and a reason to further worship God. The doctrine of God's sovereignty in salvation, from whatever persuasion and flavor one holds the emphasis, should lead one to exalt the grace and mercy of God and not incite fear or doubt about God's character. Divine reprobation in the deterministic sense offers no such security or edification, nor does it find its genesis in Scripture.

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<sup>6</sup> Enns, *Moody Handbook*, 515

<sup>7</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 847.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Foulkes, "Predestination," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, electronic ed., Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 629.

## Free Will

The biblical presentation of free will affirms that this facet of man is consistent with his own creation in the image of God. *Imago Dei* is evidence itself of man's will, for if there were no actual capacity for choice according to will, the truth of being made in the image of God is diminished. A suitable alternative to seeing the free will of man as irreconcilable with God's sovereignty is the notion that human responsibility falls under the scope of God's sovereignty. In other words, God's sovereignty does not preclude the will of man, rather it includes it. If humanity is made in the image of God (which it is), then there are certain attributes inherent within created man consistent with the image of God,<sup>9</sup> not the least of which is a will. A number of passages highlight man's lone responsibility is to receive salvation (Jn 1:12, 3:16; Acts 16:31; 1 Jn 5:13), and it is abundantly clear from these passages that man is only responding to God's wooing, not gaining any merit in works to gain salvation.<sup>10</sup> So the most appealing understanding of the nature of man's will is that, while God does draw men unto himself, man is still responsible and able to respond to the grace of God.

## John 3

Soteriological debate should not emphasize what is viewed as more right or less right in terms of sovereignty and free will. Both are expressed in Scripture and John 3 is a passage with clear demonstration of this principle. More sustainable and respectable theological discourse can continue with compatibilism, as it were, of sovereignty and free will, as a legitimate alternative to both Calvinism and Arminianism. There is a more moderate approach which accepts aspect of each traditional theology of soteriology, but without essentially endorsing either. As with

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<sup>9</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 425.

<sup>10</sup> Enns, *Moody Handbook*, 345.

sovereignty and free will, both are quite evident within the Bible, so one need not be preferred over the other, at least according to Jesus in John 3:16.

This verse is arguably one of the most well-known verses in the world, and the sovereignty of God and the free will of man are both present within this all-important sentence. God's love for the world prompted him to send his only Son, Jesus, in order to provide eternal life to those who believe. What cannot be stressed enough is that God has sovereignly provided salvation, and as Borchert notes, "The full perspective is that God is the initiator and principal actor in salvation, and we should never think that salvation originated with us (cf. 1 John 4:9–10).<sup>11</sup>" Scripture is abundantly clear that God is the author and completer of the faith (Heb 12:2). Carson notes that God's love is what compelled him to make available salvation to the world, and without this great love, there would be not a single person who would be redeemed.<sup>12</sup> Not many argue against these truths, but the questions roll in concerning who the "whoever" is in this reference. For the Calvinist, "whoever" is whoever God has already sovereignly elected. For the Arminian, "whoever" is whom God has chosen according to his foreknowledge, seeing who would respond to him, but allowing for complete autonomy of the will of man.

Additionally, if the coming of Jesus meant for the salvation of the elect, according to a more extreme holding of Calvinism (like that of supralapsarianism), verse 17 is a difficult one to reconcile with the conclusions of such a line of thought. If the salvation of some according to the election of God means salvation, then the salvation of some means the condemnation of the rest according to this theory. But John 3:17 makes clear that God sending Jesus into the world was not meant for condemnation, but for salvation. This is consistent with the coexistence of God's

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<sup>11</sup> Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, vol. 25A, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 184.

<sup>12</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 206.

sovereignty and man's free will, that God has elected, chosen the saved, but he has in no way foreordained others to eternal judgment.

### **Romans 9**

A champion passage for the Calvinist persuasion is Romans 9, in particular Paul's discussion concerning God's will in his choice to steer and direct people however he desires. Paul expresses his deep desire that his Jewish brethren will be saved, as it gives him great sorrow to see their hardened hearts, such that he wished even himself accursed that they might be saved (9:1-5). Paul establishes that those who are true Israel are not necessarily so in flesh in blood, but according to promise and faith (9:6-13), and then he further describes the partial hardening that has come upon Israel during the time of the gospel going to the Gentiles (9:14-29). Within this final section comes much of the argument for the traditional Calvinist understanding of the sovereignty of God over and against the general Arminian teaching of free will.

Many will point to Paul's usage of Pharaoh as an example of God's complete control in the entirety of salvation, for good or for judgment, specifically the phrase, "he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills" (9:18). The argument is centered on the scriptural quotation from Exodus 9:16 where the Lord says for a specific reason Pharaoh has been raised up, namely that God's power would be known throughout the world. This begs the question – does God raise up certain individuals in order to demonstrate his wrath? In the New Testament context, one might ask this: does God create some in order to damn them, and others in order to save them? Herein lies the crux of the Calvinist and Arminian debate. If the answer is affirmative, the Calvinist has much explaining to do for all of the other passages of Scripture that point away from a deterministic framework (Jn 3:16; Rom 10:9-13; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9). But if some aspect of God's sovereignty is involved in choosing some to be saved, the Arminian must



answer the question: to what extent does God's sovereignty reach in salvation, and where is man's responsibility in it all?

In the exegesis of this most challenging passage, a few observations are helpful in framing Paul's argument of the sovereignty of God, an argument that does not nullify Israel's own responsibility to choose God or not. As Mounce details in his treatment of the passage, the Lord's decision to show mercy is his own choice, free from the agency of man; yet, though God elects with his divine will, it is illogical to conclude that God was solely responsible for Israel's rejection.<sup>13</sup> He observes that Paul later places the responsibility of Israel's rejection squarely on the nation's shoulders, which demonstrates the principle that the Lord's divine will somehow sets aside the free will of man.<sup>14</sup> Others like Hendricksen at least maintain consistency in that "election and reprobation stand and fall together"<sup>15</sup> At least Hendricksen's honesty is refreshing as far as Calvinist conclusions on the subject are concerned, and his position is not buried behind the guise of paradox; however, while the ultimate antithesis to divine election is ultimately divine judgment, the way in which an individual ends up a recipient of God's wrath matters – is it God's decree or is it man's responsibility? The more consistent position Scripturally is that while God does choose and elect, he does so on the basis of foreknowledge, thus allowing for genuine choice and freedom.

The question remains: would God remain completely just and good if this element of sovereign reprobation were true? Paul believes so, and it is consistent with the sovereignty of God – he can do whatever he wants, and man is in no place to say otherwise (9:19-20).

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<sup>13</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 199–200.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>15</sup> William Hendricksen, *Romans, New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 322.

This passage certainly displays the sovereignty of God, and the believer should take heart, and not fear, because God has extended mercy through Jesus Christ. While there is a partial hardening of Israel, Israel is responsible for their own hardening. Given, though, that this presentation of God's election is clear, but the idea of reprobation is in the hypothetical, one must conclude that God indeed does elect those according to his grace and sovereignty, but the responsibility to either accept or reject his grace is according to the individual's will. If one responds favorably, it is because God has elected him or her and they responded to his draw. If one rejects salvation offered in Christ, it is because of their own decision apart from the foreordination of God.

### **Ephesians 2**

Another critical passage in this debate is Ephesians 2, specifically verses 8-9. The main discussion within these verses is the antecedent of "this" (τοῦτο) in verse 8. Does τοῦτο refer back to "faith," does it point back to "saved," or does it point to the whole clause and concept of salvation by faith? The first interpretation, which can scarcely be regarded as the majority, sees the gift as that of faith. In other words, this is a Calvinistic sense in which faith is a gift – it is given to an individual in order that they might be saved. The argument is that the vehicle whereby one receives forgiveness of sins is itself given of God to the individual believing, not necessarily an act of the individual himself or herself. The concept of faith as a gift has presence in the New Testament as here in Ephesians (see also Rom 12:3; 1 Cor 12:9), but these other contexts suggest something other than what one would call "saving faith," or faith that leads to the regenerative work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in one's life. There is not another passage with this particular verbiage that expressly says faith leading to salvation is given to an individual, beyond what some say Ephesians 2:8 is teaching.

Others, such as Lincoln state that τοῦτο refers to the whole clause in general, not specifically faith or grace.<sup>16</sup> This word order in the Greek, while it has no exact replication in Paul's writing, is nevertheless consistent with the remainder of Paul's theology concerning faith, grace, and salvation.<sup>17</sup> Arnold says this is the majority interpretation among contemporary scholars,<sup>18</sup> and one of the most well-regarded experts on Ephesian biblical scholarship, Harold Hoehner, rejects the first interpretation on grounds of the antecedent nouns (being feminine) not matching the neuter gender of τοῦτο.<sup>19</sup> He states that τοῦτο refers back to the entire clause, like Arnold and Lincoln, and further illustrates that this type of construction has precedence throughout the rest of the book in general (Eph 1:15 referring to 1:3-14; Eph 3:1 reflecting on 2:11-22; Eph 3:14 looking back to 3:1-13).<sup>20</sup>

What is of further value with this passage is the additional clarification in verse 9 that even while faith is the exercise of the individual (as opposed to God in the reformed rendering), salvation and grace are not results of the works of that individual (even though faith is exercised by such). Paul maintainins that faith, while it is a gift of God, is nonetheless linked with he will of man, not something that God directly enacts in anyone. This passage exegetically affirms the teaching that grace and salvation is a gift, but faith is an exercise of the human will. Confusion enters the discussion with the temptation to suppose that an exercise of faith somehow makes an individual meritorious in some way before God, as if this exercise of the will somehow

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, vol. 42, *World Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word, Inc., 1990), 112.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 139.

<sup>19</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 342.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 343.

contributes to the salvation already purchased.<sup>21</sup> To say one must receive the free gift of salvation in Christ by their own accord and exercise of faith is not inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture, since the regenerative work and salvation comes according to the power of God.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Coexistence of Sovereignty and Free Will in Scripture**

What is clear to this point is that Scripture teaches both the just, divine sovereignty of God and also the ability and responsibility of man to respond to God's gracious gift of salvation in Christ Jesus. Unfortunately, the driver in much of this theological debate is a result of theological discipline itself: the attempt to fully know and understand, as best as humanly possible, the way in which God works and interacts with creation, specifically as it relates to salvation. Theological study is necessary and noble, but it certainly has its limitations in deciphering God's ways. What Calvinism and Arminianism do, especially in their extremes, is to confidently assert the successful distillation of complex doctrinal, philosophical, historical theology into a ready-made package of easily understandable theological truth consistent with the Scriptures. While there are legitimate merits to both schools of thought, there remains the possibility that there is middle ground between the two.

The weakest link in the chain of theology is not the character of God, his prerogative, nor the biblical principles expressed in Scripture, but the finitude of the human mind in

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<sup>21</sup> A. Skevington Wood, *Ephesians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 11, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 36. He writes, "Yet again Paul reminds his readers (as in v.5) that they owe their salvation to the undeserved favor of God. Grace is at once the objective, operative, and instrumental cause. He expands the previous statement by adding that the subjective medium (or apprehending cause) of salvation is faith, which is also its necessary condition. Faith, however, is not a quality, a virtue, or a faculty. It is not something man can produce. It is simply a trustful response that itself is evoked by the Holy Spirit." It is a mystery how one can come to this conclusion when exegetically this is not the intention of Paul's inclusion of verse 8. While man does not earn his salvation, and the sovereignty of God is displayed in his grace and gift of salvation in Christ, faith is presented as a step man must take in order to receive God's grace. This is consistent with Jesus's response to the crowd when they ask what work they must do in order to inherit the kingdom, and Jesus responds that they should believe – in other words, exercise faith (Jn 6:25-29).

<sup>22</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 10, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2019), 69.

understanding how an all-powerful Creator operates inside the confines of time and human limitation. The best-trained and best-read theologians may shudder at the thought of an inconsistent conclusion such as, “elements of both sovereignty and free will exist,” seeing such an assertion as logically and philosophically incoherent. If all doctrine had to be completely understandable philosophically then there are other doctrines in doubt, such as the Trinity.

While philosophical and logical arguments have their rightful place in the discussion, some things are out of the mind’s complete grasp. Is this not also consistent with Scripture? Paul seems to think that God’s ways are beyond complete comprehension, even in the context of God’s dealing with unbelieving Israel: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom 11:33). The primary issue with extremes in both Calvinism and Arminianism is that God’s ways have become scrutable, and each one asserts that one is the best representation, and in extreme cases, that the other has it all wrong! To be certain, there are many godly men and women who hold to these theologies who are respectable and responsible with their conclusions. However, just as the doctrine of the Trinity is beyond perfect understanding, so also is the biblical presentation of God’s sovereignty and man’s free will. Both are taught, both are present within the entire narrative of Scripture.

### **The Commands of Scripture**

This may be a less-academic argument than one stemming purely from logic according to the basic, historical-grammatical approach to interpreting the word of God, but it bears mentioning in the discussion of determinism. Essentially, the modern Calvinist asserts man still has responsibility for actions and decisions in life, even matters of the Christian life, except for those pertaining to the process (for lack of a better term) of salvation. The more extreme

Calvinists would say all of human history, down to individual actions, is determined by God. If this is the case, the one must consider why the Lord, through the ages of history and pages of Scripture, has provided a multitude of spiritual commands for people to obey, chief among them is, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). According to Calvinist theology, the command in this verse applies not to men, but to God, since faith can only be given by God! The alternative argued in this paper is suitable, accounting for commands in Scripture given for obedient followers of God. If man is stripped of all responsibility to be obedient in and of his own will, empowered by the Holy Spirit, then the words of Jesus fall flat when he says, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (Jn 15:10), and add to this the countless commands in Scripture which expect personal obedience of the individual, not of God. In the extreme deterministic framework, the commands of God appear to just be noise.

### **Conclusion**

Scripture presents the reality of God’s divine sovereignty alongside the responsibility of man to, of his own accord, receive the grace of God in Christ Jesus for salvation. Furthermore, the Bible’s presentation of election is done in a manner to provide comfort and peace to believers, not to create fear and doubt. Calvinists may say that any ability within man to respond to God’s gracious salvation encroaches on the sovereignty of God, thus giving man merit in salvation; however, this conclusion is unnecessary. On the reverse, the Arminian’s extreme position that there is some good left in man must be rejected (the idea that on the basis of this remnant of goodness one may respond to God’s grace). The study of election, divine sovereignty, and free will should bring people to the point of worship. While his conclusions are not the same as in this essay, Grudem, in his discussion on election, notes three significant attitudes believers

should consider in the study of God's sovereignty in election: that it is a comfort to the soul, a reason to altogether worship God, and an exhortation to share the Gospel.<sup>23</sup> What a comfort the gospel truth is that God has chosen believers, and this is reason to praise and to be comforted, and this reality is further reason to share with the world the unique hope believers have.

To be sure, Scripture is clear that no one is saved unless the Father draws him (Jn 6:44), and in addition to verses like these, passages teach the responsibility to believe lies not with God but with each individual (Jn 3:16; Acts 2:37-38). Rather than an emphasis on one aspect of sovereignty or one aspect of responsibility, both should be presented as equal and present within the great salvation offered in Christ. The man's responsibility according to free will earns him no merit before God for salvation, but neither does God force him to be saved. The problem comes not from either side of theology on this issue, but a refusal to accept that a tension exists within Scripture of both concepts.<sup>24</sup> The error is in the overemphasis of one to the neglect of the other, but Scripture is clear that both can and do coexist, even if in man's limited ability to conceptualize God and how he works one cannot fully comprehend how it all fits together.

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<sup>23</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 820-821, EBSCO.

<sup>24</sup> Borchert, *John 1-11*, 183-184.

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