



# The Sovereignty of God and the Responsibility of Man: A Theological Sermon

(Various)

1. The Sovereignty of God
2. The Responsibility of Man
3. Both Together

Last week in our exposition of Matthew 11:25-30, several theological issues were raised. We saw Jesus declaring that God is the one who both hides and reveals truth from people, as He sees fit (Matt. 11:25). Additionally, we also saw Jesus say that no one knows the Father, except the one to whom Jesus wills to reveal Him (Matt. 11:27). These are great and glorious truths of God's sovereignty in salvation. Although these are great and glorious truths, many people will raise objections to them. They often say, "But, you are denying that man is responsible for his sin! If God alone determines who will come to Him, then those who don't come aren't responsible for their not coming." Yet, Jesus certainly didn't buy into this line of reasoning. He said, "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you Bethsaida! ... I say to you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment, than for you" (Matt. 11:21-22). Jesus believed that those in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum were responsible for their sin of rejecting Him. In fact, the day of judgment will bear out how responsible they were! Here we see Jesus, on the one hand, asserting the absolute sovereignty of God in the salvation of men. He asserts this by declaring that God is the one who hides and reveals to whomever He pleases. Yet, on the other hand, Jesus condemns those who heard, but never responded. He holds them fully responsible for their sin. This is such an important subject for us to grasp and embrace, that it would be worthwhile for us to take a closer look at the theological issues raised in last week's sermon. Thus, I am going to use Matthew 11 as a spring board to address the issue of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man.

The topic of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man has consumed the thoughts of many people down through the ages. It has fueled the fire to countless hours of meditation and contemplation. This has been the subject of many, many conversations. Writers have filled many pages of many books in discussing these things. This is not a new phenomenon. For centuries, people have strained to understand and reconcile these two truths. From the Stoics of Paul's day (Acts 17:18) to the Zen Buddhist of today, this topic has been debated. From Augustine in the 4th century to Arminius of the 16th century, discussion and debates have taken place. I'm under no illusion that I can solve all of the philosophical ramifications of all of the discussions. However, I do believe that I can give you a Biblical perspective on these matters, which ought to satisfy you in your own thoughts and readings and discussions.

As is true for many topics, there have been degrees of persuasion in either direction on this discussion. Some emphasize and embrace the sovereignty of God to such a degree that in practice they have become fatalists. They believe that fate has determined everything already. They say that you might try with all of your might to change your fate, but in the end, against your will and your efforts, you will finally succumb. Thus, in effect, they have denied the responsibility of man.

On the other hand, some have emphasized and embraced the responsibility of man to such a degree that they have concluded that God is not sovereign. These are the ones who have experienced their own choices in this world to do whatever they please to do (e.g. drive a car, put on a blue shirt, and drink a lemonade). They have reached the conclusion that they are the ones who will ultimately decide their destinies. Thus, in effect, they have denied the sovereignty of God upon their lives.

When we come to the Bible, we see that **both of these truths are strongly affirmed**. We see that the Bible speaks often of God's absolute control over the affairs of this world. We also see that the Bible often speaks of man's responsibility for his actions. There are even places in the Scripture where these two truths exist in the same passage without any concern for their apparent "contradiction." In Matthew 11, we have seen that both truths are taught, without any sense of contradiction at all. Jesus condemned the unrepentant cities as responsible for their lack of repentance (Matt. 11:20-24). Immediately afterwards, Jesus praised the Father, who was pleased to hide and reveal these truths to whomever He wished (Matt. 11:24-27). Jesus follows this up with an all-inclusive invitation for those who are burdened with their sin to come to Jesus and find rest in Him (Matt. 11:28-29). Jesus said this without expressing any tension in how these things appear to contradict each other.

Some have called these two truths a "paradox." Others have called these two truths an "antimony" (as J. I. Packer has in his book, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*). The difficulty with these two terms is that they imply some type of contradiction. Charles Spurgeon once called them "friends." When asked to reconcile these two truths, he would say, "I never reconcile friends" ("High Doctrine and Broad Doctrine," *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 30, 1884, sermon #1762). The best name that I have come across to explain these two views is that they are "compatible," (which D. A. Carson has used to explain them). They are entirely compatible. You don't need to side up with one or the other. They aren't contradictory. (In our puny minds, perhaps they are, but not in the mind of God.)

As we approach this topic this morning, there are several different approaches that can be taken. The first is the approach of **philosophy**. People say, "I can figure this out." These people study, read, and think deeply about these truths. They just constantly think and talk about it, hoping to figure it out. It consumes them. It is fine if you must pursue this route, but be warned: "Don't be wise beyond that which is written."

Another approach is that of **neglect**. Those who take this approach say, "I can't figure it out." It is essentially the opposite of the philosophical approach. Instead of thinking you can figure it out, you are so certain that you cannot figure it out, that you do not even try. The is like the following story:

There was once a mother, who, while busy with her needle, was teaching her daughter to read. The child at length came to a hard word, and asked her mother what it was. "Spell it, my child," said she. The child made an effort, but did not succeed. "Mother," said she, "I can't spell it." "Let me see it then." She handed her the book, and the mother, after puzzling over it for some time, returned it to the child, and said, "Skip it then." (*Revival & Revivalism*, p.318)

The warning with this approach is the opposite of the first one: "strive to know what God has revealed."

Yet another approach is that of **worship**. Those who take this approach will say, "I will wonder and worship at the things which I don't understand." This is the approach that I would encourage you to take. We are helped by the advice of Charles Spurgeon as we seek to delve into these great truths. Spurgeon said, ...

"The truest way is to accept the difficulty wherever you find it in God's word, and to exercise your faith upon it. ... I often feel a joy within my spirit in having to believe what I cannot understand; and sometimes when I have to say to myself, "How can it be?" I find a joy in replying that it is so written, and therefore it must be so. Instead of all reasoning stands the utterance of God. Our Father speaks, and doubts are silenced: his Spirit writes, and we believe. I feel great pleasure in gliding down the river of revelation, upon a voyage of discovery, and hour by hour obtaining fresh knowledge of divine truth; but where I come to an end of progress, and see my way blocked up by a sublimely awful difficulty, I find equal pleasure in casting anchor under the lee of the obstacle, and waiting till the pilot tells me what next to do. When we cannot go through a truth, we may be led over it, or round it, and what matters? Our highest benefit comes not of answering riddles, but of obeying commands by the power of love. Suppose we can see no further into the subject — what then? Shall we trouble about that? Must there not be an end of human knowledge somewhere? May we not be perfectly satisfied for God to appoint the boundary of understanding? Let us not therefore run our heads against difficulties of our own invention, and certainly not against those which God has seen fit to leave for us" ("High Doctrine and Broad Doctrine," *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 30, 1884, sermon #1762).

My premise this morning, and I'd like us all to embrace it whole-heartedly, is this: **God is absolutely sovereign in every way in the affairs of this universe. But God exercises his sovereignty in such a way that we, as His creatures, are entirely responsible for every action we take.** How does He do this? I don't know. I don't claim to know. But I do believe that He does it, because the Bible teaches us that He does. I'm not willing to deny either of these truths, for the sake of the other one. Like Spurgeon advised, I believe them both to be true by faith in God's word. My sermon outline this morning is very simple and straightforward: we will look specifically at the **sovereignty of God**, and then we'll look specifically at the **responsibility of man**. Finally, we will look at **both issues together**.

I normally work very hard to make as many observations and deductions directly from the text of Scripture before you in your laps. As a result we stay focused on one passage and do not need to turn everywhere in your Bible. This morning, however, will be different. I anticipate that we be examining many different texts of Scripture. Let's look at our first point, ...

## 1. The Sovereignty of God

This is very simple to demonstrate in the Scriptures, because the Bible is so packed with statements affirming the sovereignty of God. I'll only give you a few.

### 1. Psalm 24:1

"The earth is the LORD's, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it" (Psalm 24:1). This is a great verse describing the sovereign ownership that the LORD has upon the earth. It teaches that **God owns everything in this world**. This includes the land, the seas, the bugs, and the trees. This includes all of the precious metals (gold, silver, titanium). This includes all of the precious jewels (diamonds and rubies). This includes all of the animals that roam the earth. "Every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is Mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all it contains" (Ps. 50:10-12).

God owns everything. This includes you and me. You may think that you are the king of your own life. You may think that you can do as you please, without any accountability. But we need to realize that we have an owner and a master who is the LORD of the universe. God owns everything. This means that God cannot ever be guilty of coveting. He will never see something that He desperately wants to have, but can't get it. We might go shopping in the mall and see something that we really want, but do not have the money to buy. But God owns the store in the mall. God owns the mall.

### 2. Daniel 4:34-35

"His dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom endures from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'" Daniel 4:34-35

Daniel 4:34-35 teaches that **God rules over the world**, and nobody can thwart His rule. This means that we can't force God to something

against His will. We cannot "ward off His hand." Police might be able to handcuff a criminal against His will. Terrorists might be able to kidnap missionaries against their will. Nations might be able to defeat other nations who are fighting to prevent it. But, God will never be conquered, taken captive, or manipulated against His desire and will. This includes Satan and all of his demons. The world isn't "God" vs. "Satan." The world is ruled by God, but He allows Satan to roam throughout the world. Yet, Satan will not thwart God's plan.

"Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (Psalm 115:3). If God wants to do something, He will do it. If God doesn't want to do something, He won't do it. God does whatever He pleases, because He rules over the world.

### 3. Isaiah 46:10-11

"[God declares] the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'; Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it" (Isaiah 46:10-11).

Isaiah 46:10-11 teaches that **God plans the events of the world**. We see here that God is planning the things that happen before they happen. He said, "from ancient times" is when He does these things. He declares the end from the beginning. In other words, God writes history before it happens. Notice that God is not "predicting" history. He is "making history." Many people will speak about these types of things and try to tell you that God can "predict" history because He knows what is going to happen. Certainly God knows what is going to happen. But this verse says God can "predict" the future because He causes the future to happen. He says, "My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure" (verse 10). This is true of the insignificant "bird of prey" (verse 11). This is true of the "man of My purpose" (verse 11). "Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it."

That God doesn't simply know the future, but actually shapes it and forms it is seen in In Isaiah 44:25, where we are told that God "causes the omen of boasters to fail, making fools out of diviners." Consider the sportswriters of our day who are convinced that the Los Angeles Lakers are going to win the NBA title now that they have Karl Malone and Gary Payton to add to their already dominant team. God looks down on these sportswriters, and can cause the Lakers to lose so that these sportswriters are made to be fools. Or, God looks down upon the stockbrokers who think that they have it all figured out with great stocks that are sure to succeed. God can make the stockbrokers foolish by causing certain companies to fail, which brings down their stock prices.

A few verses later, God demonstrates how He makes history to accomplish His will. "It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire'" (Isaiah 44:28). Cyrus is the name of the Persian king who would allow the Jews to go back to Jerusalem after the exile and rebuild their capital city, Jerusalem. This would happen some 150 years later. This would happen after the exile, which hadn't even happened at the time Isaiah wrote. Furthermore, God said that His people would go free "without any payment or reward" (Is. 45:13). The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell us how Cyrus actually paid to have Jerusalem rebuilt! God plans the events of the world. He can't be thwarted.

Consider these verses of Scripture that teach the same truth:

- "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD" (Prov. 16:33).
- "The mind of a man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps" (Prov. 16:9).
- "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes" (Prov. 21:1).
- God "made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation" (Acts 17:26).

### 4. Romans 9:16.

Romans chapter 9 teaches that **God is sovereign over the souls of men**. A few weeks ago, when Steve Belonger preached "In Defense of Peter," he made a great point. He said that there are many people who will agree with you up to this point in our discussion. Many people don't have a problem with God owning everything, ruling the world, and planning the events of the world. But those same people will balk when you come to say that God is sovereign over the salvation of men. They balk when you begin to say that you are saved, not because you chose God, but because God chose to have mercy upon you to make you alive from the dead (Eph. 2:4-6). There is something inside of people that want to give credit to themselves for seeing the truth and believing in God. But it is God who changes the heart, and there is no greater passage to demonstrate this than of Romans 9. To pick up the context, let's begin in verse 10, ...

And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "the older will serve the younger." Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." **So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.** (Romans 9:10-16)

The reason you sit here today and believe in Christ isn't because you were smart enough to figure out that your only hope was Jesus. It isn't because you willed to believe in Jesus. It is because God chose to be merciful to you. God is sovereign over the souls of men. God chooses those who will be saved. Verse 16 is clear. Salvation doesn't depend upon the man who wills and runs and thinks and studies and prays and does all types of religious works. Salvation is wrapped up in the sovereign pleasure of God to be merciful to His elect. "It is by His doing that you are in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:30). Jesus said, "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44). John writes, "As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the flesh, nor of the will of men, but of God" (John 1:12,13).

- God owns everything (Ps. 24:1). He can't covet.
- God rules the world (Dan. 4:34-35). He can't be defeated.
- God plans the events of the world (Is. 46:10-11). He can't be thwarted.
- God is sovereign over the souls of men (Romans 9:10-16). He is free to dispense His mercy.

Before I close this first point, let me simply say that there is a difference between knowing this and owning this. If you own the sovereignty of God, you will fear nothing in this life, but God, Himself. You will pray more fervently, because you will willingly submit yourself to God, who controls all things. You will be a humble person, because you understand that it is all of grace that God has saved you in Christ Jesus. Your worship will abound in enthusiasm. You will be strengthened to live through the most difficult of circumstances.

Be sure you understand today that God is sovereign in all of his dealings with you, and you will find great comfort that your suffering isn't out of God's control. How is it that we can be assured that "God ... will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able"? (1 Cor. 10:13). We can be sure, because God is sovereign over the affairs of your life. Church family, I exhort you to own the sovereignty of God.

Let's move to our second point this morning, ...

## 2. The Responsibility of Man

The Bible is full of calls, commands, and urgings for people everywhere to repent of their sins and believe on Jesus who alone can save them. Since the Bible commands us to repent and believe, it is fair to imply that we are responsible for doing so. Consider the sampling. The message of Jesus was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). Jesus called people to "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:29). Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24).

Peter told those who were "pierced to the heart" with conviction over their sin of crucifying Jesus to "repent" (Acts 2:37, 38). Philip preached Jesus to the Ethiopian Eunuch and baptized him upon his profession of faith (Acts 8:35, 37). Paul told the jailer in Philippi to "Believe in the Lord Jesus" (Acts 16:31). Paul declared to the Areopagus, "God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent" in light of the coming return of Jesus (Acts 17:30). All of these calls to salvation imply our responsibility before God to hear His word and believe it and obey it.

In the Bible, there are times when appeals are made to the *choice* of people. Moses told the people of Israel, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants" (Deut. 30:19). Joshua put a similar choice before the people. He said, "And if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Josh 24:15). There is a clear implication that people are responsible for their own choice to believe or not to believe.

There are times God appeals to the intellect, "Come now, and let us reason together, ... though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey, you will eat the best of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword" (Isaiah 1:18-20). Paul even went to the extreme of "begging" the Corinthians to "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

The coming judgment is a constant theme in Scripture. The prophets spoke of the coming judgment (Is. 66:16; Jer. 25:31; Ezek. 38:22). The Psalmist said, "The wicked will not stand in the judgment" (Ps. 1:5). Jesus spoke of the coming judgment (Matthew 10:15; 11:21-24). Paul spoke of the coming judgment (2 Thess. 1:6-9). The writer to the Hebrews wrote that "it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). The book of Revelation is all about the judgment to come. **Judgment implies responsibility.** One verse makes this very clear. It is found in Romans 2:5, "**Because** of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Romans 2:5). It is because of the wickedness of people that God will judge them in His wrath. This implies that they are responsible for their wickedness. There is no doubt that the Bible teaches that all of us are responsible for our sin.

We live in a day and a culture where people overwhelmingly deny this. Increasingly we are living in a society where people work very hard at denying responsibility for their sin. When our children are disobedient and rebellious, we call it a syndrome. An abusive father is excused because he was abused as a child. Sammy Sosa uses a corked bat and says, "It was a mistake," rather than, "I'm guilty. I'm sorry." Our former president committed perjury and squirmed out of it through litigation. The concept of punishment is so foreign in our society that we often view criminals as victims, not criminals. Thus, we send people to jail to rehabilitate them rather than to punish them. Paul described our society very well. He said, "And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them." (Romans 1:28-32)

I previously encouraged you to own the sovereignty of God. I also encourage you to own the responsibility of man. There is a difference in knowing about your responsibility before God and really owning your responsibility for your sin. I want you to think of your life and some sin that you committed against someone else. This may be your brother, sister, wife, husband, father, or mother. Think of some way that you wronged another person. Now, think of the words you may have used when apologizing to this person. We often say something like, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Please forgive me." Think about those words for a minute. What does it mean to say "I didn't mean it"? When you did what whatever you did, you did mean it. You did mean to hurt your family member. But now you are sorry that you did it. You ought to say, "I'm sorry the sin I committed against you. I am fully responsible for my actions. It was sinful and wrong. I have confessed it to God as sin. I

confess it to you now as sin. Will you please forgive me?"

When you really own the doctrine of the responsibility of man, you will understand how fully responsible you are for your own sin before God. **When you own the doctrine of the responsibility of man, you will never seek to excuse your sin or minimize your sin.** You will see your sin for what it is -- a wicked offense before God and before others. You will see how responsible you are, how guilty you are, and how deserving of death you are. And when you have reached that point, then the gospel of Christ comes as really good news. Through faith in Christ, you can become perfectly righteous and blameless! Your guilt is removed. You realize that the punishment that was to be yours has been borne already on the cross of Jesus! This is good news for us to embrace this morning!

When you take away the full responsibility of your sin, you lessen the majesty, worth, and glory of the cross of Christ. When you think yourself to be a little guilty, but a little bit a victim, you essentially are saying that Jesus' death wasn't worth as much as it was worth. This is what led Paul to say, "may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14).

So, the Bible clearly teaches that God is Sovereign. It also teaches that man is responsible. You need to own and internalize both of these doctrines and cherish them as truth for your soul. I want us now to see how the Bible often places both of these "friends" together. So let's move on to my third point this morning, ...

### 3. Both Together

There are numerous instances in the Bible where both of these truths exist in the same passage, side by side. Let us start with the passage found in Genesis 50.

#### Passage #1 - Genesis 50:15-20

We have here the story of the brothers of Joseph coming to speak with him after the death of Jacob. They are fearing for their lives, lest the evil that they had done to him years ago (in selling him into slavery) bring punishment upon themselves.

We pick up the story in verse 15, "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'What if Joseph should bear a grudge against us and pay us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!'" Joseph's brothers are referring to the events recorded in Genesis 37. His brothers were in the land of Canaan, fuming over Jacob's special love for his son Joseph. Jacob sent Joseph to see how his brothers were doing (Gen. 37:14). As these brothers saw Joseph coming, they "plotted against him to put him to death" (Gen. 37:18). Finally, they threw him in a pit and eventually sold him, rather than killing him (Gen. 37:28). All along, as they were thinking this, they knew that they were fully responsible for their sin. In Gen. 50:15, they felt their guilt, which led them to scheme to make peace with their brother.

We see their plan, in verses 16-18, "So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, 'Your father charged before he died, saying, 'Thus you shall say to Joseph, 'Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.'" And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, 'Behold, we are your servants.'"

Joseph's brothers felt the weight of their responsibility. Joseph knew it too. But Joseph also understood of God's sovereignty. Notice how Joseph puts both of these themes (of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man) together. "But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? And as for you, **you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good** in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.'" Joseph explained how God was sovereign to use their evil intents to work about a good thing for their family.

Earlier, Joseph had told his brothers multiple times of God's sovereignty over the events with his brothers. He said, ...

- "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance" (Gen. 45:5).
- "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance" (Gen. 45:7).
- "It was not you who sent me here, but God" (Gen. 45:8).

Joseph understood that God was never out of control in the affairs of Joseph's brothers, or the Ishmaelites who purchased Joseph for 20 shekels of silver, or of Potiphar's evil wife who attempted to seduce him, or of the cupbearer who would wait for two years before he remembered Joseph so that he could tell Pharaoh at the moment when Pharaoh had the crucial dream. God was not out of control of the heavens which gave 7 years of abundance and 7 years of drought, causing Joseph's brothers to come to him unknowingly. God was in control of all of these circumstance. On two occasions, Joseph attributes his rise to vice-regent in Egypt to God. He said, ...

- "[God] has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt" (Gen. 45:8).
- "God has made me lord of all Egypt" (Gen. 45:9).

Joseph's brothers were responsible for their sin, and they felt it. Joseph never denied their responsibility. Yet, God was fully sovereign in controlling their sin, so that the "great deliverance" would take place (Gen. 45:7). We see these two truths side by side, in the same text, without apparent contradiction.

By way of application, I would have you consider the question of what sustained Joseph in these difficult times? I believe that it was a commitment to the sovereignty of God in all things. Why else would Joseph give such a God-centered answer to his brother? These words

didn't come from nowhere. They came from Joseph's meditation up his situation. His conclusion was that God was sovereign in all of the events of his life.

## Passage #2 - Exodus 10:1-3

We find ourselves in the midst of the story of the plagues. There was a pattern with each of these ten plagues. Moses and Aaron would go to Pharaoh and request that Pharaoh allow the Hebrew people to go and celebrate a feast to the LORD in the wilderness (Ex. 5:2). Moses and Aaron made this request several times. Each time, Pharaoh refused them. And each time Pharaoh refused, God inflicted upon Pharaoh and Egypt some plague. Here in Exodus 10, God explains His purpose in this matter.

Exodus 10:1-3

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may perform these signs of Mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son, and of your grandson, how I made a mockery of the Egyptians, and how I performed My signs among them; that you may know that I am the LORD."

And Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said to him, "Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, 'How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me? Let My people go, that they may serve Me.'

It is very clear as day that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. I hear many people say, "Yeah, well, God didn't harden Pharaoh's heart until Pharaoh hardened his own heart." That's not true. You simply need to read Exodus and discover the chronology of the events of Moses' life to understand this. When Moses was still in exile in Midian for murdering an Egyptian (see Exodus 2:11-15), God came to Moses and said, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead" (Ex. 4:19). God continued, "When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go" (Ex. 4:21). Now, I ask you, was Pharaoh's heart hardened to Moses' request for the people to go at this time? Of course not. When Moses was told these things, he was still in Midian, travelling back to Egypt. Pharaoh hadn't even considered this request yet. God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

God is sovereign over the hearts of men. Our hearts are not out-of-control, sinning machines that God can't move in accordance with His own pleasure. Proverbs 21:1 says "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it whenever He wishes." In the case of Pharaoh, God hardened Pharaoh's heart. God hardened Pharaoh's heart with a purpose. It was God's purpose that Pharaoh not let the Egyptians go (1) so that God would perform these great plagues, (2) so that the Hebrew children and grandchildren can hear great stories of God's awesome power, (3) so that they might know that God is the LORD. We see God's sovereignty on display here. He is moving in the heart of Pharaoh to make him callous before Moses and Aaron. He does this so that He can accomplish His purpose.

The sovereignty of God is clear in this passage. But so is the responsibility of man. Consider verse 3 again, "And Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said to him, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, "How long will *you* refuse to humble yourself before Me? Let My people go, that they may serve Me"' (Exodus 10:3). Moses and Aaron consider Pharaoh as a responsible agent. "Pharaoh, *you* are refusing to humble your heart. How long are *you* going to do this? When are *you* finally going to give in and let My people go?" When the plague of locusts came upon the land, we find Pharaoh calling for Moses and Aaron, and saying (in verse 16), "I have sinned against the LORD your God and against you. Now therefore, please forgive *my sin* only this once, and make supplication to the LORD your God, that He would only remove this death from me." Pharaoh felt the responsibility of his sin. He is better than our society in that he didn't try to blame somebody (or something) for his own sin.

Here is the point: the Sovereignty of God and the Responsibility of Man are friends. They co-exist in the same passage of Scripture.

## Passage #3 - Joshua 11:16-20

The book of Joshua tells the story of how Israel conquered the land of Palestine. They marched right across Israel, splitting the land in two. They then conquered the southern portion of Palestine followed by the northern portion. Beginning in verse 16 of Joshua 11, we have a summary of what happened.

Joshua 11:16-19

Thus Joshua took all that land: the hill country and all the Negev [i.e. in the south], all that land of Goshen, the lowland, the Arabah, the hill country of Israel and its lowland from Mount Halak, that rises toward Seir, even as far as Baal-gad in the valley of Lebanon [i.e. in the north] at the foot of Mount Hermon. And he captured all their kings and struck them down and put them to death. Joshua waged war a long time with all these kings. There was not a city which made peace with the sons of Israel except the Hivites living in Gibeon; they took them all in battle.

When Israel went to fight against these cities in Palestine, they all willingly took upon themselves the weapons of war and fought against Israel. They were responsible for their choice to fight. They died because they weren't able to withstand against the strength of the Israelite army. But there was one city that chose not to fight, the Gibeonites (verse 19). They chose to come with deception. They pretended to be from a far distant land, so Joshua and the other leaders made a covenant with them, as they failed to "ask for the counsel of the LORD" (Josh. 9:14). The Israelite leaders made peace with the Gibeonites, so the Gibeonites weren't destroyed. In verse 20, we see the sovereignty of God.

"For it was of the LORD to harden their hearts, to meet Israel in battle in order that he might utterly destroy them, that they might receive no mercy, but that he might destroy them, just as the LORD had commanded Moses" (Josh. 11:20).

If these nations had sought mercy, they wouldn't have been destroyed completely. God had commanded Moses to instruct the people to come in and totally wipe out the nations that they would encounter. Moses wrote, "when the LORD your God shall deliver them before you, and you shall defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them" (Deut. 7:2). It was important that the people didn't come and humble themselves and plead for mercy, lest they might not be destroyed. So, God exerted His sovereignty and hardened their hearts to that they would "meet Israel in battle" so that they might be utterly destroyed. The sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man were existing side by side.

#### Passage #4 - 1 Kings 12:1-15

The context of this passage is that Solomon has just died. His son, Rehoboam, was reigning in his place (1 Kings 11:43). As Rehoboam was taking control, Jeroboam, who represented the northern ten tribes of Israel, asked him (in verse 4), "Your father made our yoke hard; now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke which he put on us, and we will serve you." Rehoboam instructed Jeroboam to go away for three days and return again to hear the answer.

During these three days of contemplation, Rehoboam sought advice from the old men, who said advised him to lighten the load. Rehoboam also sought advice from the young men, who advised him to make the yoke heavier. Rehoboam weighed these two things in his mind and chose to follow the advice of the young men. So, when Jeroboam returned, He told him (verse 14), "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions." Rehoboam was responsible for his choice. He was also ultimately dividing the kingdom of Israel into two kingdoms, which this act precipitated.

The statement of God's sovereignty come in verse 15, "So the king did not listen to the people; for *it was a turn of events from the LORD*, that He might establish His word, which the LORD spoke through Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat." Before Solomon died, Ahijah had prophesied on the LORD's behalf to Jeroboam, "Behold, I will tear the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon and give you ten tribes" (1 Kings 11:31). Rehoboam's decision to follow the foolish young men, rather than the old men was "a turn of events from the LORD." God was in control of Rehoboam's decisions. God had already prophesied of 10 tribes under the control of Jeroboam. Was Rehoboam responsible for his decision? Of course he was. Was God sovereign over his decision? Of course he was. The Bible always clings to both of these truths.

#### Passage #5 - Acts 4:25-28

The final passage I want to look at this morning is Acts 4. I want to close this morning with the story of the crucifixion account because I believe that it is the most dramatic and most important display of how the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man intersect.

Picture with me the events of the crucifixion. Jesus was in the garden with His disciples anticipating his death and sweating drops of blood due to the strain upon Him. One of His own disciples, Judas, comes up and betrays Him with a kiss (Matt. 26:48). Jesus is promptly arrested by a great multitude who came to the garden with swords and clubs (Matt. 26:47). A Roman cohort comes to arrest Jesus, along with the chief priests and officers of the temple and the elders of the people (John 18:12). They take Jesus away to have a hurried trial during the night and convict Jesus of trumped up charges (Luke 22:71). Jesus appears before Pontius Pilate, who under pressure from the crowds, orders Jesus to be crucified (Luke 23:20-24). The Roman soldiers beat Him, mock Him, spit on Him, place a crown of thorns upon His head, eventually crucify Him (Matt. 27:27-31). Every single one of these men were responsible for their actions. Everyone from the high priest, who set the plans in motion, to the youngest child, who cried out with the others, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" are all responsible for the part they played in putting to death the Lord of glory. In Acts 4:25-26, the early church quoted Psalm 2 and applied the guilt of their actions upon those involved in putting Jesus to death. They prayed, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the LORD, and against His Christ." Their raging was sinful. They were responsible for their actions. They were guilty in this regard.

Yet we read the early church continuing, "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur" (Acts 4:27-28). The events surrounding the death of Jesus were not out of the sovereign control of God at all. God's hand "predestined" them to occur. In the gospels, Jesus often spoke of His upcoming death in Jerusalem (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33). Before His arrest, He prayed in the upper room, "Father, the hour has come" (John 17:1). He knew what lay ahead, and that knowledge gave Him great anguish in the garden.

**In the crucifixion of Jesus, God was sovereign and man was responsible.** They both have to be there, or the cross doesn't work. Suppose that God was not sovereign in the death of Jesus. Then you have the initiative for the death of Jesus coming from the evil intentions of the high priests and elders. These religious leaders thwart the plan of God by crucifying the Messiah. So, God comes up with "plan B" to raise Him from the dead and proclaim that Jesus died as a sacrifice for sins, when He should have been accepted as the rightful Messiah. This doesn't work with the words of Acts 4. This doesn't work with Jesus' anticipation of His death. Man must have been responsible for putting Jesus to death.

Suppose that man wasn't responsible for putting Jesus to death. Then, you have God moving people around like puppets. In this case, you can't talk about their conspiracy. In this case, you can't talk about their sin. You have just removed the whole reason why Jesus had to die. In the crucifixion of Jesus, God was sovereign and man was responsible. They both have to be there, or the cross doesn't work. The Bible teaches both of these truths. Don't deny either of them. If for nothing else, for the sake of the cross, don't deny either of them.

#### Concluding remarks.

As we close, I want you to notice how carefully I have used my words this morning. Specifically, I want you to notice that there are two words that I didn't mention at all this morning. Notice that **I spoke nothing about the "freedom of the will."** The Bible doesn't describe us as "free." The Bible describes us as responsible (i.e. sinners facing judgment). Once you begin to think in terms of the "freedom of the will," you will most likely become confused. Here's why: If we are ultimately free, then God cannot be ultimately sovereign, because there is something

that He doesn't control. So, I would encourage you not to talk about the "freedom of the will." Rather, form your thoughts around the "responsibility of man," as I did today.

Notice also that **I spoke nothing about "ability."** The Bible doesn't describe us as "able to repent." The Bible commands us to repent. There is a big difference in these two. Don't ever assume that a command to do something implies that we have the ability to do what was commanded. For instance, Jesus told us, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). Do you really believe that you are able to fulfill that command, simply because you are told to do it? I can't. I have tried, but I have found myself to fail miserably. If you begin to reason that "responsibility means ability," you will be a confused theologian. You can't reconcile "ability" with statements like, "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44). You can't reconcile ability with being "dead in sins" (Eph. 2:3).

God is absolutely sovereign in every way in the affairs of this universe. But, God exercises his sovereignty in such a way that we, as His creatures, are entirely responsible for every action we take. **God is Sovereign** and **Man is Responsible**, may we embrace these "friends."

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on July 15, 2003 by Steve Brandon.  
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