Chapter 3
The Sovereignty of God over Man

The Turning Point
Most Christians will not have much trouble digesting and accepting the truths of the previous chapter. It is the rare church-goer who will think, much less say, “God is not sovereign.” After all, the Bible declares that God is sovereign and the very concept of God demands that He be so. Man finds in this teaching a certain amount of peace and comfort. Charles Spurgeon rightly said, “There is no attribute more comforting to His children than that of God’s Sovereignty.”

However, on a practical level, many have difficulty comprehending such a Being. Even more have trouble relating to Him because we are not like Him. Humans are not unique (in that sense of the word that God is unique). Mankind is bound by time. People change every single day, moment by moment. In this environment, we often (albeit unconsciously) put God into this humanistic understanding of existence. It will not work. God is not like us and, more importantly, we are not like God. It is at this very point of looking at God’s sovereignty from the viewpoint of man that many trip. From the quote above, Spurgeon continued.

On the other hand, there is no doctrine more hated by worldlings, no truth of which they have made such a football, as the great, stupendous, but yet most certain doctrine of the Sovereignty of the infinite Jehovah. Men will allow God to be everywhere except on His throne. They will allow Him to be in His worship to fashion worlds and make stars. They will allow Him to be in His almonry to dispense His alms and bestow His bounties. They will allow Him to sustain the earth and bear up the pillars thereof, or light the lamps of heaven, or rule the waves of the ever-moving ocean; but when God ascends His throne, His creatures then gnash their teeth, and we proclaim an enthroned God, and His right to do as He wills with His own, to dispose of His creatures as He thinks well, without consulting them in the matter; then it is that we are hissed and execrated, and then it is that men turn a deaf ear to us, for God on His throne is not the God they love. But it is God upon the throne that we love to preach. It is God upon His throne whom we trust.

Just How Sovereign?
What you decide here about God’s sovereignty will greatly impact and determine the outcome of the rest of this course. Do we really believe in this God? Can God truly do whatever He desires to do? Can God truly do what He wants for the simple reason that it pleases Him? Is God enthroned to rule solely over nature or non-personal events?

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2 Ibid.
In the church, one can rightly expect the Christian to embrace the doctrine of the sovereignty of God as both biblical and true. However, this may be done in principle but not necessarily in practice. Many are quick to say, “I believe in the sovereignty of God.” Yet, once pressed to believe consistently that God can do as He pleases without getting permission from anyone, we discover that many who in fact confess that with their lips find that their hearts are far from it.

For many, the sovereignty of God means that God can do anything with me that I give him permission to do! While very few (if any) in the church would think to voice such a belief outright, many do so in a more subtle way. There is something about the sovereignty of God that troubles sinful man. The angels and glorified saints in heaven have no trouble acknowledging this truth about God. They rejoice in it eternally but many still on this earth, even within the church, rebel against it. The inspired authors of Scripture held nothing back in prescribing complete authority to God in all things throughout the pages of the Old Testament and New Testament. However, sinful man is deeply troubled by this same truth.

**Common Objections**

The rebellion is usually couched in terms used to protect the dignity and freedom of man. Man is at the ready to lead in a fierce battle to protect the autonomy of man. While God needs no help, I posit that a greater cause is always to ensure the dignity and freedom of the Lord, over and above our own. For that reason, this point is the turning point in the discussion. If you assert God’s absolute freedom, ability, and power in this created order, you will not be able to retreat when the discussion turns to God’s sovereignty over the rest of His creation – humanity.

There are several common objections that are raised when the discussion turns to God’s sovereignty over man. A few of these are:

1) If God is absolutely sovereign over man, then man cannot be responsible for his actions.
2) God values man’s free will so much that He would never violate man’s free will. 3

We see these objections in the following statement:

God will save the greatest number of people that is actually achievable without violating their free choice. A loving God will not force anyone against their will to love Him or to worship Him. Forced love is not love; forced worship is not worship. Heaven will not be composed of robots. . . .

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3 Two other common objections: “If God is absolutely sovereign over man, then there is no need for man to do anything” and “If God is absolutely sovereign over man, then man is not truly free.” We will answer these objections in later chapters.
In short, God will not save people at all cost – not if it is at the cost of their freedom and dignity – for that would mean at the cost of their humanity.

. . . Those whom God can lovingly persuade have been foreordained to eternal life. Those whom He cannot, are destined in accordance with their own choice to eternal destruction.4

If we are to dispel these objections, we must accomplish the following:

1) Prove that the Bible teaches the sovereignty of God and the moral responsibility of man.
2) Prove from the Bible that God does interfere with the thoughts, motives, attitudes, and decisions of men.

Therefore, we now turn our attention to numerous passages that will accomplish this task. We will see in the passages that follow that man is morally responsible before a sovereign God and that God often “meddles” with the alleged autonomous free will of man.

**Passages that Teach God’s Sovereignty over Man**

We have examined numerous passages that clearly teach God’s sovereign control over the cosmos, history, the created order, and even “coincidences.” There are just as many passages in Scripture that deal with God’s sovereignty over man as there are for His sovereignty over nature and circumstances. Remember, even God’s direct sovereignty over nature has an indirect impact on man. Consider the implications of God’s control of forces of nature like hurricanes and earthquakes. However, we see from numerous passages that God also intervenes directly in the hearts, minds, and lives of men and women.

**The Sovereign of all other “Sovereigns”**

In our democratic nation, most of us have virtually no concept of a true sovereign ruler. Our leaders are in positions of power because we put them there.5 However, in the days of the Old and New Testament, people knew quite well the power of a sovereign ruler. Kings held all life and power in their hands.

Yet, even with all this power, we read in the Scriptures that “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases” (Proverbs 21:1). In Solomon’s day, there was no Congress to pass laws he did not like or a Supreme Court to restrain his actions.6 The king’s word was final and authoritative. Yet, this passage teaches that the stubborn will of the most powerful man on earth is easily turned in the

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5 Of course, the ultimate reason is the sovereign control of God over nations (as we learned in chapter two).
direction desired by the Lord. If God is not sovereign over mankind (including kings),
then how can this verse be true in any sense of the word?

In Deuteronomy, we read that “Sihon the king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him,
for the LORD your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, that he might
give him into your hand, as he is this day” (Deuteronomy 2:30). This king exercised his
kingly right to deny access to the land he ruled. However, we read that God had a
purpose in this: God hardened the heart of the king so that this king might be defeated
and subjugated to the Israelites.

A similar incident is found in Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land. We read that
“Joshua made war a long time with all those kings. . . . it was the LORD's doing to
harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should
be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, just as the
LORD commanded Moses” (Joshua 11:18-20).

The heart and mind of the most powerful people on earth are fully malleable in the hands
of an omnipotent sovereign God. Using an argument from the greater to the lesser, if God
has the right, power, and inclination to deal with kings this way, then He has as much
right, power, and inclination to lesser men. We see this in other passages:

- The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps (Proverbs
  16:9).
- Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails
  (Proverbs 19:21).
- I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who
  walks to direct his steps (Jeremiah 10:23).
- A man's steps are from the LORD; how then can man understand his way? (Pro
  20:24).

The Restraint of Evil (Genesis 20)

God moves in people’s hearts to bless His people and fulfill His purpose. God also
restrains people from evil. We see this in the life of Abraham. Abraham, the great
example of faith, feared for his own life in the presence of King Abimelech. Abraham
lied and said that Sarah was his sister, not his wife (Gen 20:2). Because of this lie, the
king moved to take Sarah as his wife.

God, however, did not allow this to happen. God came to the king in a dream and
revealed to him that “Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart,
and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her”
(Gen 20:6). God did nothing to hinder the king physically or circumstantially. The
impedance was all in Abimelech’s mind. God protected the purity of Abraham’s
promised son by His sovereign power.
The Unintended Benefit of Evil Intentions (Genesis 45, 50)

Joseph’s brothers hated their younger sibling and sold him into slavery. Years later, after much had transpired, they brothers met their long-lost sibling once again. However, now Joseph had risen in power over Egypt, used by God in a great way to save the nation of Israel. Joseph could do as he wished with the men but he realized God’s purpose in all that had happened in his life. He told his brothers, “So it was not you who sent me here, but God” (Gen 45:8). Later, he revealed to them that “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” (Gen 50:20).

It is important to note what Joseph did NOT say. He did not say that God took the brothers’ sinful acts and turn it around, making lemonade out of lemons. He also did not say that God intended to whisk Joseph off to Egypt first-class and have him rise to power in some other way until Joseph’s brothers messed the initial plan up.

Instead, Joseph tells us that it was God’s intent to have Joseph sold into slavery to bring about a later good for all the people of Israel. God was working sovereignly in Joseph’s sale into slavery and his long prison term on trumped-up charges. God’s sovereignty does not mean that we will never endure pain or suffering. However, it does mean that God is in control of all our pain and suffering and He has a purpose in it. God will not be reduced to a role of mere contingency.7

The Plundering of the Egyptians (Exodus 3, 12)

Jerry Bridges asks us to picture ourselves in this situation:

You are the latest generation in your family to work for a cruel boss. It is the only life you have ever known. Your salary puts you below the poverty line. You are discriminated against and oppressed by this boss to the point where you are nothing more than a slave. Multiple generations of your family have worked for this company but now the day has come when you are able to leave this company.

However, there is a problem: you have no financial resources, no way to make the long trip to your new life, no funds to start over in this new location. Therefore, you are stuck. You cannot leave.

So you go to this boss who has so severely mistreated you and ask for money for the trip. Amazingly, your boss doesn’t just give you a little money to help you on your way. Instead, he gives you so much money that you are now rich and he is poor.8

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That might happen in a Disney® animated movie but could it happen in real life? Yes it can. In fact, this story did happen in real life (of course, the details are slightly changed). We read this story in the Book of Exodus. The Israelites are the oppressed people and Pharaoh is the oppressive boss. God gives the command to the Hebrews to leave Egypt and Pharaoh eventually says, “Get out.” However, the Israelites have nothing to make this journey possible. God knows this and handles the situation for their benefit.

In the well-known story of Moses and the Burning Bush, God reveals His plan to Moses:

   I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. . . . I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians . . .

   I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians. (Ex 3:6-8, 19-22)

Remember, all of these words came before Moses reluctantly returned to Egypt. Yet God revealed all that would happen. The Lord told of His plan to strike the Egyptians, after which He told Moses that Pharaoh “will let you go.” It is definite in the mind of God.

God also says that He “will give [Israel] favor in the sight of the Egyptians.” God is saying that He will actually invade the minds and hearts of these pagan peoples and turn their affections favorably towards the Jews. It appears that this turn of the heart will be to the point that the Egyptians will be given almost all the treasure of Egypt. Did this come to pass? Later in Exodus, we read:

   The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing. And the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians (Ex 12:35-36).

The Egyptians did something completely contrary to normal behavior. They freely gave their slaves whatever the slaves asked for to the point of being “plundered.” They did what they did freely (“they LET them have what they asked”). Yet it was God who put this in their hearts to do so.
The Hardening of a King’s Heart (Exodus 4-14)

The story above is even more amazing when you consider all that took place prior to its occurrence. The “evil boss” in the story above was the most powerful man on earth – Pharaoh of Egypt. After God revealed His total plan to Moses in the conversation at the Burning Bush, Moses continued to doubt. He offered up the excuse that people would not listen to him (Ex 4:1) and that he was not a good speaker (Ex 4:10). Finally, Moses just said, “Please send someone else” (Ex 4:13).

Moses ultimately relented and obeyed the command of God. As he traveled, God continued to give Moses assurance by revealing even more of His plan. God told Moses, “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go” (Ex 4:21, emphasis mine).

After the long journey to Egypt, Moses met with his brother Aaron and appeared before Pharaoh. In this initial encounter, events transpired just as God told Moses they would. We read that Pharaoh responded to Moses’ request by saying, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go” (Ex 5:2).

Moses and Aaron took this response as vindication of the Lord’s control over the situation. Immediately, the brothers said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword” (Ex 5:3).

Moses saw the hand of God in Pharaoh’s initial resistance and also in Pharaoh’s act to compound the Israelites’ troubles. After meeting with Moses and Aaron, Pharaoh told his taskmasters, You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past; let them go and gather straw for themselves” (Ex 5:7ff). After this cruel act, the Hebrews were troubled and met with Moses and Aaron. They complained about Moses “interfering” with their lives. However, Moses understood that all that had transpired did so at the bidding of the Lord. The Bible says that “Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, ‘O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me?’” (Ex 5:22). Moses understood that God had said He would harden Pharaoh’s heart and not send Israel away and God did just that. Therefore, the worsened plight of the Israelites is an “evil” from God.9

Many will say that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Before Moses even completed his journey, God revealed that His intention was to bring His wrath upon the Egyptians. Contrary to popular opinion, God was not “forced” to bring about the ten plagues by Pharaoh’s stubborn heart. Instead, God reveals from the outset that His plan was to harden Pharaoh’s heart. In the same passage at the burning bush, God reveals His end-move:

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When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me. If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.” (Ex 4:21-23).

God tells Moses that many miraculous things are going to take place – not because God is responding to Pharaoh’s power but because God has already planned to unleash His wrath on the people.

Furthermore, after Pharaoh’s initial rebuff, Moses gets a “fresh start.” In Exodus 7:2-4, God repeats the words of 4:21. God repeats His instructions to Moses and Aaron, saying, “You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you.”

After the well-known incident of Moses’ staff turning into a serpent, the narrator of Exodus tells us that “Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said” (Ex 7:13; emphasis mine). This is a fulfillment of the prediction of verses 3-4. As such, “since this refusal is the intended result of God’s hardening in 7:3-4a, it would be unwarranted to construe 7:13 as anything other than a fulfillment of God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.” The natural assumption is that the narrator had the opinion that God is the one at work from the beginning to the end. Also, we believe God is at work in order to fulfill His grand purpose, as seen earlier, “The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD” (Ex 7:5).

After the two meetings between Moses and Pharaoh had gone exactly as God told Moses they would, the prerequisite for the soon-coming demonstration of God’s power had been met. After these two events, God tells Moses “Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning . . . ” (Ex 7:14-15). It is at this point that the plagues begin and Pharaoh’s heart is already hardened.

- **Plague #1: water to blood.** “Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said” (Ex 7:22; emphasis mine).
- **Plague #2: frogs.** The king promised to let the people go if the frogs would be removed. Moses allowed Pharaoh to name the time for the removal of the frogs. Once they were gone, “Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the LORD had said” (Ex 8:15; emphasis mine).
- **Plague #3: lice.** The magicians could not replicate this act and confessed God was behind it (Ex 8:18-19). However, we read that “Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said” (Ex 8:19).

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• **Plague #4: flies.** Again Pharaoh lied to gain relief and once the flies were gone, “Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go” (Ex 8:32).

• **Plague #5: death of cattle.** There is no remorse from Pharaoh but after hearing that “not one of the livestock of Israel was dead ... the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go” (Ex 9:7; emphasis mine).

• **Plague #6: boils.** There was no interaction between Moses and Pharaoh. The narrator simply writes, “the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had spoken to Moses” (Ex 9:12; emphasis mine). The effect of uniting “The Lord had spoken” to “The Lord hardened” is to show the relationship between the two and the previous instances where the phrase was used (plagues 1, 2, 3). The relationship between the times where God explicitly does the hardening and where the hardening was done passively and where Pharaoh hardened his own heart is confirmation that these three expressions all represent the results of God’s initial, expressed intention to harden Pharaoh’s heart for His own divine purposes.¹²

• **Plague #7: hail.** Again Pharaoh promised to let the Jews go. Moses prayed and the hail went away “so that you may know that the earth is the Lord’s” (Ex 9:29). However “when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again and hardened his heart. ... So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people of Israel go, just as the LORD had spoken through Moses” (Ex 9:35). Three things:¹³
  - The purpose of exalting God’s right and power over the earth is achieved not only in the plagues but also in their removal.
  - In hardening his heart, Pharaoh is said to have sinned. God found fault with Pharaoh and his hard heart. We might find it unfair for God to do this but Paul anticipated this objection in Romans 9:19 (in which Paul directly refers to this very passage of Scripture).
  - This is the last time we read “as God had said.” It has occurred six times since the announcement by God in 4:21 and 7:3. The repeated reference back to these predictions has shown that the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was understood by the narrator to be God’s work from the very beginning.

• **Plague #8: locusts.** Before the eight plague, God told Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them ... and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson ... and ... that you may know that I am the Lord” (Ex 10:1-2). This statement is explicit. It also reveals another purpose for these plagues and the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart – the future benefit of Israel’s faith in God. After the plague was lifted, we read that “the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go” (Ex 10:20).

• **Plague #9: Darkness.** The Lord sent three days of darkness on Egypt. Pharaoh allowed all the Jews to leave Egypt except for their flocks and herds. But “the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go” Ex 10:27).

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Plague #10: Death of the firstborn. Finally, Moses was told of the death of Pharaoh’s son and all the firstborn of Egypt. At the end of the instructions, God told Moses, “Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt” (Ex 11:9). The purpose remains the same – God’s glory. In Ex 11:10, the narrator says that Moses and Aaron “did all these wonders before Pharaoh,” which functions as a summary of all the plagues together and recall once again the predictions of 4:21 and 7:3. The point is that “all the miracles” (not just half, as some say), did not move Pharaoh’s heart because God was hardening Pharaoh’s heart.

After the tenth plague, Pharaoh allowed the Hebrews to leave. However, we read that God warned Moses about Pharaoh’s plan. God told Moses that “Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, ‘They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’ And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD” (Ex 14:3-4). In 14:5, we see that the “mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people.”

In 14:8, “the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the people of Israel.” God comforted Moses and the Israelites by saying “I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen” (Ex 14:17-18).

The result is well known: “Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses” (Ex 14:31). God’s final aim, revealed at the very beginning, was fulfilled. His power was demonstrated and His might and glory were lifted high.

The Nullification of Covetousness (Exodus 34)

An amazing story is told in Exodus 34 that seems is almost made in passing and easy to miss. Moses is discussing the various feasts ordained by the Lord. In giving instructions regarding the Feasts of Weeks, we read the following:

You shall observe the Feast of Weeks, the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year's end. Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel. For I will cast out nations before you and enlarge your borders; no one shall covet your land, when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year (Ex 34:22-24).

Let’s put this in perspective. The modern equivalent to this would be for the U.S. government to halt all action and transactions, all banks to shut down, all military

Adapted from Jerry Bridges, “Does Divine Sovereignty Make A Difference in Everyday Life?” in Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, ed. Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 300.
maneuvers and operations to cease, all military personnel to be furloughed, all businesses and educational institutions to shut down, and for every single citizen to gather for one giant Christian assembly three times a year. Can you imagine how vulnerable America would be for those three occasions?

However, this is exactly what God commanded Israel to do and He promised they would be safe during these special times. How? God would not allow anyone to covet them or their lands, much less invade and take over. God could make that promise because in His sovereignty, He has the power to restrain people not only from doing something, but even desiring to do it.

The Effectiveness of our Prayers (I Kings 8)

Those who deny the sovereignty of God over individuals in an attempt to elevate the autonomous free will of man deny this belief in their prayers. We see an illustration of a proper understanding of the relationship between sovereignty and prayer at Solomon’s dedication of the temple. He not only prays that God will respond to the people in a certain way when they repent, but Solomon can also pray, “The LORD our God be with us, as he was with our fathers. May he not leave us or forsake us, that he may incline our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways and to keep his commandments, his statutes, and his rules, which he commanded our fathers” (I Kings 8:57-58). Solomon sees the responsibility of the people to repent but also sees the truth that God will bring about the repentance. God is sovereign and people are responsible.

The objection is often voiced: “If God is sovereign, then why bother to pray?” A.A. Hodge answered this question with another question:

If God has eternally decreed that you should live, what is the use of your breathing? If God eternally decreed that you should talk, what is the use of your opening your mouth? If God has eternally decreed that you should reap a crop, what is the use of your sowing the seed? If God has eternally decreed that your stomach should contain food, what is the use of your eating?

In order to educate us, [God] demands that we should use the means, or go without the ends that depend upon them. There are plenty of fools who make . . . the relation . . . of God to the time-life of man an excuse for neglecting prayer. But of all the many fools in the United States, there is not one absurd enough to make the same eternal decree an excuse for not chewing his food or for not voluntarily inflating his lungs.

15 It is noteworthy to add that all people pray in a Calvinistic sense that God has the ability and desire to act upon the free will of men. We pray that God will “open his eyes” and “make him uncomfortable” and others such acts. God must do something if anyone is to be saved. The question then becomes to what extent does God move and to what end are His movements effective.
Instead of asking “Why bother to pray?”, it would be better to ask, “If God is not sovereign over the affairs, intentions, plans, abilities, wills, and desires of man, then how can we pray? Why should we pray?”

Consider the prayers we make for God to save a lost individual. John Piper writes that those who wish to deny or lessen divine sovereignty

. . . do not believe that God has the right to intrude upon a person’s rebellion, and overcome it, and draw that person effectually to faith and salvation. They do not believe that God has the right to exert Himself so powerfully in grace as to overcome all the resistance of a hardened sinner. Instead, they believe that man himself has the sole right of final determination in the choices and affections of his heart toward God. Every person, they say, has final self-determination in whether they will overcome the hardness of their hearts and come to Christ.17

If it is said that the most that God can do to save a man is to restore a certain measure of enabling grace (which God does for all men everywhere), then all men are brought to a similar point. No one is actually saved but all men are brought to a position of “savability” – so as to make it possible for the soul to act on its own so that salvation is the result. This means that the ultimate reason one person repents and another does not cannot be found in God. How can we pray to God for salvation when God has already done all that He can/will do for an individual?

One will answer that we can pray that God would plant in the lost soul an inner unrest and longing for Christ. That may be so but if God can do so without impinging on the free will of man, then how strong can that longing be? First, for a lost man to experience “unrest” and “longing” for Christ implies that he is at rest without Christ and currently longs to remain apart from Christ. Therefore, any action on God’s part would violate this current condition.18

Furthermore, there are two levels of longing: strong enough to draw a person to Christ and not strong enough to do the same. If the longing is strong enough to lead that person to pursue Christ, then why not plant that level of longing in all? Which of the two longings should we pray that God implant in a person’s life? If we pray for the strong longing, we are praying for God to do an effectual work in someone’s life, which is Calvinistic. If we pray for the weaker longing, then we are praying for an ineffectual longing that leaves a person in their sin.

In this case, one must either accept God’s ability to move effectually in the hearts of men or accept that he cannot effectively pray for his friends and family.

The Rending of a Kingdom (1 Kings 11-12)

Solomon committed idolatry and sinned against the Lord. As a consequence, God told him that the kingdom of Israel would be torn away from the king. However, God also said that “for the sake of David your father I will not do it in your days, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son” (1 Kings 11:12).

After the death of Solomon, his son Rehoboam assumed the throne. In one of his first acts as king, the people ask for a reduction in taxes and labor. The new king sought advice. The older and wiser consultants suggested that he listen to the people. The younger and less wise advisors suggested that he make things even worse on his subjects. Rehoboam foolishly followed the advice of the younger set. We read that “the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word, which the LORD spoke by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat” (1 Kings 12:15).

I am glad the Lord included this last sentence to explain why things happened the way they did. A casual observer would not have imagined the Lord’s hand in anything that Rehoboam did. Instead, the same event that can be classified as Rehoboam’s foolish judgment is also depicted in the Bible as the Lord’s wise dealing with His people.

The Manipulation of Two Kings (Ezra 1, 7)

As great as Nebuchadnezzar was, his Babylonian empire could not survive forever. In fact, from the time of Israel’s exile, Babylon only survived another fifty years before it crumbled from within and the Persian empire swooped in to assume power. The Persian king Cyrus inherited the vast population of Jews as his subjects. Amazingly, in 539 BC, Cyrus decreed that the Jews return to their homeland. We read the account in Ezra:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD . . . has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people . . . let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel” (Ezra 1:1-3).

The Bible clearly revels that Cyrus issued this command because the Lord moved the king to do so. It appeared to the Jews that their lives were bound in the will of the king but that king’s will was bound in the hand of God.

We get a good perspective on this from God’s prophet Isaiah:

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus . . . For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people
may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:1-6; emphasis mine).

Cyrus was used by God to accomplish God’s plan for Israel and Cyrus did not even know he was being thus used. Cyrus, and Pharaoh, both acted as their hearts desired but their hearts were directed by the Lord to accomplish His eternal purposes.

In the seventh chapter of Ezra, the leader reads from a letter from Artaxerxes, providing the Jews with finances to rebuild the temple. In the letter, the king writes:

I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province Beyond the River: Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence, up to 100 talents of silver, 100 cors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons (Ezra 7:21-23).

After reading the letter, Ezra says, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:27, emphasis mine).

The Calming of a Fearful King (Psalm 139)

In Psalm 139, King David is in grave danger and fearful for his life. He has taken a stand for God but his enemies oppose him for it. He does not know the outcome of this situation but he knows enough to flee into the presence of God. Basically, he asks, “What can I count on right now?”

In the first six verses, David reminds himself that God knows him well. He writes:

You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it (Psalm 139:2-6).

David acknowledges that his outward behavior and even his inward thoughts are laid bare before the Lord. He uses the word “hem” in verse five but it is a much stronger word (it was often used to speak of siege warfare). David understood that God has him under His control. Unlike many today, David is strangely comforted by this knowledge and action of God.

David sees he cannot outmove God, outthink God, or outplan God. Everywhere he turns, God is there. It must be asked, “How can an Arminian concept of simple foreknowledge account for this reaction by David?” Simple foreknowledge dictates that God reacts to man’s actions or beliefs or thoughts. Yet here, David is drawing strength from the truth that God never loses sight of him, always understands what he is thinking and feeling, and is always far out in front of David’s current situation.20

In verses 13-18, David reviews the truth that God created him. As he ponders God’s “great works,” he writes, “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Psalm 139:16).

The NIV’s interpretive translation indicates that David is merely saying that God knows the finite number of days that David will be alive. However, a more accurate rending of the ESV shows that here David affirms that God has written the script of his life. He writes that all his days were “formed” as a clay pot would be formed. This calms David because he knows that his present situation is not by chance. He is living out God’s plan for his life and he finds great comfort and confidence in that.

In the midst of great chaos, David has found a greater certainty. He reaches out for something immovable and grasps firmly to God’s sovereignty in his life. With this new God-centered perspective, David stands confident in the Lord’s control of his life.

**The Disobedience of a Eunuch (Daniel 1)**

The people of Israel are once again in exile. In 586 BC, the Babylonian empire crushed Jerusalem and carried tens of thousands of Israelites back to Babylon as slaves. Among the exiles were four noticeable young men. You know these men by either their Jewish or Babylonian names: Daniel (Belteshazzar), Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Meshach), and Azariah (Abednego). These four men were among several given special treatment in the palace of the king. They were to be given the same food as the king and the best education in the land.

Daniel rebelled against this attempt at Babylonian assimilation and asked to be exempt from this special treatment. The king’s servant in charge of these Hebrews expressed his reluctance to comply with Daniel’s request, saying, “I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king” (Daniel 1:10).

To honor Daniel’s request was to disobey the order of the king, an act punishable by execution. Yet, the eunuch eventually agreed to Daniel’s request. Why? The Bible tells us so in verse nine: “God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs” (Daniel 1:9).

**A Return to Sanity (Daniel 4)**

Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon, the mightiest nation on the face of the earth. In looking at his wealth and power, the king became prideful and said, “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” (Daniel 4:30).

The Lord instantly tore his kingdom from him and drove him to insanity. God punished Nebuchadnezzar for his boastfulness, declaring, “The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will” (Daniel 4:31-32, emphasis mine).

At the end of this term of punishment, Nebuchadnezzar regained his ability to reason:

> At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?” (Daniel 4:34-35, emphasis mine).

The king acknowledged God for who He truly is and saw himself for who he truly was. Nebuchadnezzar was a creature, incapable of disputing the decisions of almighty God.

**The Blow of a Blunt Instrument (Isaiah 10)**

The tenth chapter of Isaiah reveals God’s plan to punish Israel for their sin. His instrument of punishment is the mighty army of Assyria, which God calls “the rod of my anger” and also says that “the staff [or club] in their hands is my fury” (Isaiah 10:5). The Assyrians were a vicious people and treated their enemies with extreme brutality. Yet, with this horrible “club,” God states that “Against a godless nation I send [Assyria], and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets” (Is 10:6).

Isaiah tells us that Assyria “does not so intend, and his heart does not so think; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few” (Is 10:7). The Assyrians have no idea that they are pawns in the hands of God and will be used to bring to fruition His perfect plan. If they had known, they likely would have rebelled against it.

However, there is a problem. In verse twelve, God says, “When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes” (Is 6:12).

How can God use them and then punish them for what they did?
However, in the verses that follow, the Assyrians make many boasts of the many cities they have already destroyed and the prowess of their military leaders. Then, in verse thirteen, we see that the Assyrians say, “By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding; I remove the boundaries of peoples, and plunder their treasures; like a bull I bring down those who sit on thrones” (Is 10:13).

God is holding Assyria responsible for their actions, even though it was He who put the thoughts in the mind of the Assyrians and used them to accomplish His ultimate purpose of punishing Israel. God does not punish them because they warred against Israel but because they thought in their arrogance that they were doing it by their own strength.21

This is rebellion. God asks, “Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it, or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it? As if a rod should wield him who lifts it, or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood!” (Is 10:15).

This single passage tells us that Isaiah believed in the responsibility of man and the sovereign control of God over the ways of man.

**The Crucifixion of the Messiah (Acts 2, 4)**

Peter and John have just been released from prison after the healing incident of the cripple at the temple gate (Acts 3). When they returned to their fellow believers and told them what had happened, the response to the others was to pray (Acts 4:24). Their prayer begins with an acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty over heaven and earth as Creator (see page 21, 25). Then, they recall the words of David in Psalm 2, in which the king of Israel asked, “Why did the Gentiles rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against His Anointed” (Acts 4:25).

These early believers see the fulfillment of Scripture in the death of the Messiah that they proclaim. However, it is not only the content of their prayer that is important; it is also the way they say it.22 They said:

> . . . for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place (Acts 4:27-28).

Peter had already taught this lesson. Earlier in Acts we read these words:

> Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know-- this Jesus, delivered up

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22 Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, 188.
according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men (Acts 2:22-23).

This is a remarkable statement because there were a great number of people involved in the conspiracy to crucify the Savior: Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Jewish leaders, the Jewish people. The words of the Jewish believers reveal that they consider all of them to be guilty of this most horrible of all acts in human history. Yet, at the same time, they are able to say that God was behind it all and that these conspirators “did whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”

It must be this way. If the cross was the plan of the people alone, then God must have simply come in at the last moment and made the best of a very bad situation. The cross could not have been the plan of God. On the other hand, if God was orchestrating these events in such a way that the people involved were mere puppets on a string, then we cannot talk of conspiracy or even of sin.

Instead we see that God was sovereignly at work in the death of Christ and humans are held responsible for their part in this evil deed – even as they accomplished the Father’s ultimate purpose.

**The Heart of a Minister (2 Cor 8)**

In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, he writes about the generous nature of the churches in Macedonia. In doing so, he urged the Corinthians to give financially, as well (2 Cor 8:11-14). To prove that he was not acting alone in making this request, he shares this insight into the life of his associate, Titus:

> But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord (2 Cor 8:16-17).

God had placed within Titus’ heart the same desire that Paul had. Paul then goes on to display the human responsibility side of the equation: “he is going to you of his own accord.”

**The Exception or the Rule?**

Are these isolated incidents that the Lord uses only in times of Israel’s national emergencies? We must say, “No” for the Bible reveals many such times of interference from God. If a plea for “special circumstances” is raised at every introduction of a biblical example, one soon begins to wonder just how special those circumstances truly are.
Sovereignty and Responsibility = Compatibilism

From these passages we see two biblical truths emerge:23

1) God is absolutely sovereign, but His sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated.
2) Human beings are morally responsible creatures – they significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, make decisions, and so forth, and they are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God contingent.

The non-Calvinist will typically see the two propositions above as contradictory because of a preconceived understanding of the autonomy of man. Interestingly, “neither the Lord nor the authors of Scripture seem bothered by what agitates Arminians.”24

The Bible teaches both of these truths though they may seem contradictory at first blush to some.25 However, since the Bible teaches both, we must accept both as truth and see that the two propositions are not contradictory but are instead compatible with one another.

God is truly and completely sovereign. He is the highest and greatest, He controls everything, His will is absolute, and He does whatever He pleases. A.W. Pink, in his book The Attributes of God said:

The “god” of this twentieth century no more resembles the Supreme Sovereign of Holy Writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun. The “god” who is now talked about in the average pulpit, spoken of in the ordinary Sunday School, mentioned in much of the religious literature of the day, and preached in most of the so-called Bible Conferences is the figment of human imagination, an invention of maudlin sentimentality. . . . A “god” whose will is resisted, whose designs are frustrated, whose purpose is checkmated, possesses no title to Deity, and so far from being a fit object of worship, merits naught but contempt.

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25 The same can be said with other biblical truths such as the Trinity and the hypostatic union of Christ (fully God and fully man at the same time).