

Control Freak

February 2011

Kings, shires, knights, even the Crusades! What comes to your mind when you think of sovereignty or a kingdom? Most of the time for me, it is the Medieval Ages with the castles and the peasants and the violence and the wars and people jockeying for power. And that's most likely what most people think of when we start talking about the sovereignty of a king. But let's bring it into the twenty-first century. What does a kingdom look like now? Well, it's countries and nations with presidents, prime ministers, kings, queens, and every other leadership position that has a name. It's cabinets and counsels and whatever other kind of gathering we can make to make it look like the people have some form of political control.

With these images dashing and slashing through our heads, how could we possibly enjoy the Bible's use of these same terms to describe God's rule over all of creation? As you may recall, I have already written an article on the Kingdom of God last August, but I would like to take a moment to talk about the Kingship of God over all things. That idea really does scare us deep down inside, and I would like to discover and examine why we would have such debates and arguments about God's sovereignty. In truth, we are not arguing over whether God is sovereign or not, or even how much. The debates about God's sovereignty between Calvinists and Arminians and everyone in between has little to do with God's sovereignty and more to do with our trust in the Lord!

To introduce a bit of background for those new to the great debate, the polar extremes of how we theologically view God's sovereignty consist of the Arminians on one side and the Calvinists on the other. The Calvinists take the staunch view that God is completely sovereign in that nothing can bend or break His will. They would represent a very programmed approach to God's sovereignty. They do not like the idea of free will and would seek to belittle it in light of God's sovereignty. However, the Arminians would seek to expand human free will's position in the matter and show that God takes into account human choice in His will, and that human free will can indeed change God's will in some ways. Arminianism was founded and hatched by a man named Jacobus Arminius and Calvinism was founded by John Calvin, one of the great fathers of the Reformation. I would state up front that most likely neither of these men would support the current systems and arguments in place today.

But let us get to the matters at hand. I have perhaps offended both groups because I'm the black sheep of this argument. I can agree and disagree with both sides of the extremes, as I'm sure most who read this would. So let us start with Calvinism very quickly. I will talk about the Calvinist system known as TULIP and then I will talk about the Arminian argument. But I will not spend much time on these for one reason: theological arguments only go so far and then leave us hanging in a philosophical

stalemate. I want to get to the heart of the issue.

John Calvin did not create the TULIP system, but his followers eventually did, and defend it to the death. This is the system which measures how Calvinistic you are. A five-point Calvinist is a card carrying member of the TULIP system. I am probably a one or two-point Calvinist if I wore labels, and would most likely not use the terms in the same ways a Calvinist would. I actually had a couple of TULIP lovers tell me that I can't accept more than one of their propositions without accepting them all. They were wrong. Let me list the TULIP acronym so you can see the flow of the argument:

Total Depravity
Unconditional Election
Limited Atonement
Irresistible Grace
Perseverance of the Saints

Basically the argument flows like this: All human beings are so totally depraved that they would not know God on their own. They need for God to reach out to them in some way and would not even want to be believers because they so love moral wickedness and depravity. But among the world of humanity, there are some that are elected or saved by God, and He knows who they are. So as history unfolds, those who are elected unconditionally must accept Christ and His offer of atonement. They have no true choice because God knew that they would be saved before they were even born. So then the atonement is limited to the elect. "Christ died for the elect" is a very popular mantra for Calvinists. It then follows that since Christ died for the elect, who were elect because God knew who would be elect, and chose certain ones to

believe, then to those who are elect, God's grace is irresistible. They see His grace and they are forced to be obedient to Him. Finally, the saints will persevere in all things, no matter what happens, because they are elect of God. Nothing can change that, even their own actions, which is where some interject the idea of "once saved, always saved."

Now I might not have been completely fair in my assessment, but I have been looking at this incredibly complicated debate and system for quite a while, and I attempt to simplify it for discussion purposes. You should read more on both of these camps, and everything in between. Why is this all important at all? Because we're talking about salvation here. This isn't about some minor doctrine or an opinion. We're talking about how people come to know Jesus! That is paramount. Let me now share from the Arminian side of the argument.

Arminians generally accept that humans cannot gain salvation for themselves, that they must be given the grace of God as a gift. They would say that free will is more robust than in Calvinism. Salvation is a work of God's grace and cannot be won by any means by any human being. The only conditions of election, or salvation, is that a human being must have faith in Christ's sacrifice. Christ's sacrifice, however, is not limited, but is for all of humanity, for those who accept and reject Christ. The other large tenet of Arminianism is that a believer can then turn from God's grace and become an apostate, one who falls away from God's grace and loses salvation. These two views are essentially opposites to one another.

Perhaps someday I will write an article on my personal current views of Calvinism for an article. I wrote my views on Calvinism

down in the Essays section of this website but those views have changed at least slightly. But this article is not even about these competing theological systems. It is about the sovereignty of God, the will of God, and human free will. What can we say about these things without getting in these theological frameworks? We can argue these positions and others until we are blue in the face, but you know what's interesting about both Calvinists and Arminians? They would not debate either God's sovereignty in Scripture or His predestination or His foreknowledge. They would be in agreement.

When we talk about the sovereignty of God, we must all acknowledge that God is completely sovereign. Whatever He wills happens. That is how things are. His sovereignty is based in the fact of His place as Creator of the Universe. If I design a webpage or if I make something, I have complete creative control over that thing. Whatever I will, that will happen. I have authority over it. So also, since God made the whole of creation, He is completely sovereign over it. No questions asked.

When humans debate over the sovereignty of God versus the strength of human free will, we debate from a merely human perspective. Perspective is all-important in these arguments. I would imagine God sits up in heaven on His throne and chuckles at us trying to figure all of this out. All of the angels and demons and any celestial being already sees and knows that God is completely sovereign. We humans are the ones wondering if God is fully sovereign or not. And it has to do with our perception of how He rules time and space. We think perhaps that because we contain His image, though marred it is in us, that we have the right to question Him.

But throughout the Bible, we find that God puts us in our place when we seek to usurp the throne and tell Him how it should be. There are several examples including God's response to Job, Jeremiah's potter and clay image, and Abraham taking Hagar instead of waiting for Sarah and the Lord's will to come to pass. These are just a few examples. This is how we perceive the issue of God's sovereignty from our perspective. And I believe it is because we have deeper issues that we argue over who's in charge. It is blatantly obvious who's in charge!

You see, our history does not allow us to think that one Person can have complete control over everything. We have found through our own experience and from history that one person having all the power is a very bad thing. It was Sir Francis Bacon who coined the oft quoted, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely." And he is right, when referring to human beings. But we have a prerequisite, a presupposition, when we speak in this manner about power and kings and sovereignty. Remember the images that these words bring to mind, of violence and force and danger and injustice? That's what happens when fallen and sinful humans seek absolute power. It is not even ours to begin with. And just like everything we think we own, we can't own power either. It is entrusted to us to steward like everything else in life.

Thinking that we can converse with the Almighty gives us a sense of permanence and a sense of immortality. The question of whether or not God has complete control never comes into play on our deathbeds. We are painfully aware that we are not all powerful in these times of human weakness. Jesus points this out in His Sermon on the Mount when He says that God knows our

needs and already takes care of them. He tells us not to be anxious about anything. Can we even add one hour to our lives? Or can we get back the hair that has fallen out? Nope. So why do we think that we can tell God when He messes up His plan?

And yet, we try to do this all the time. If you want to take a different route, we are often trying to figure out what God is up to. And then once we know, we then put our two cents in. We have problems with someone else driving the bus. And that is what a discussion of God's sovereignty comes down to. It's not about who's will is stronger but about us letting go and letting God do what He will do!

We have this desire to control things. We're the control freaks. But because we are surrounded by and marred by sin, we cannot have absolute power and not be corrupt. So we seek to create a mirage of our own ability and power and strength, when we are the weakest and most powerless of all! I believe that our weakness is not finding out how strong our will is compared to God's but rather finding out that we don't really trust God with everything in our lives. We would rather be in the driver's seat, not be driven by Him.

So we find ourselves realizing that God is completely sovereign. And does my will matter within the larger bounds of His will? Some say yes. Others say no. But as I said before, that is a discussion for a different article. What we must understand now is that God will do what He will do. And we need to be in a place where we can get over the fact that we're not on His speed-dial. What would happen if the person with all the power was completely good, made of goodness, and had goodness as one of His primary attributes? What would happen if

the person with all the control wanted the very best for us?

But all we can see is the pains that we've suffered while God has been at the wheel. Funny how we only remember the bad times. And those times were meant for our growth. How else would we grow but through hardship? It is an excellent tool to strengthen through trial our faith muscles. If we really believed that God is indeed all good, then we would not have a problem with His sovereignty, because no matter what happened, we could say as Paul does in Romans 8 that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him. But we must not believe that He's all good, because the moment that hardships strike, we suggest an alternate route to the Driver!

Beyond this, we have a greater need than mapping out human free will versus God's will. That greater need is to learn to fully trust without abandon the Lord who is all good. He's got our best at heart. Always. Are we there? In the midst of suffering the trial is our heart dead set that God is truly and always good? I must say that even in my insecure and trial times, I must question this basic understanding of God's goodness. When we see evil, we always ask why He doesn't just eradicate it and create the new heavens and new earth and be done with it all. But that also is a question from human perspective.

So sovereignty opens up the closet and exposes the skeletons in our darkness. We don't truly trust, do we? We don't really believe God is good, right? Or do we? These are questions that you don't solve in one sitting. With each new trial, we must once again evaluate our position on these easy mentally assenting statements. Every believer says that God is always good and

that they trust Him. But in the mist of their darkest night, they question everything. We all do. We are human. And we only know evil power.

But what if there is a God who wears power the perfect way, the way with goodness for all. What if God truly is always just and uses His power for our best? These are recurring themes of our lives, because the moment that we think we've answered these questions once for all, God sends a doosey of a trial our way that shakes us up and makes us rethink and relive the greater debate than sovereignty. The greater debate is not if God is sovereign or even how sovereign He is, but how much we trust that He is always good no matter what the situation around us. It's still a matter of perspective, but on a whole different level. May we find that God is indeed good and learn through every trial of life to trust Him more, to lean on Him more, and to put our hope in His goodness rather than our own sense of what should happen to us. May we trust Him with our very lives now and forever.