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GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY, OUR RESPONSIBILITY

Genesis 17:1-27

By

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Genesis Lesson 36

God's Sovereignty, Our Responsibility Genesis 17:1-27

A newspaper ran the following correction: "The title of a First Christian Church program in last week's paper was written as 'Our God Resigns.' The actual title is 'Our God Reigns.'" (*Reader's Digest*, 9/93, p. 53.)

Due to the prevalence of man-centered theology in our day, many Christians live as though God must have resigned as the Ruler of the universe. While no sincere Christian would come out and say such, many Christians practically deny the absolute sovereignty of God. For example, I was at a funeral where the pastor, no doubt trying to comfort those who were grieving, assured us that God had not caused this tragic accident. Perhaps he was trying to draw a fine distinction between God's causing something and His permitting it. But I didn't find his words very comforting. If God did not ultimately cause it, then who did? If Satan caused it against God's will, then Satan has equal or greater power than God, which isn't a comforting thought! If the accident was due to human free will, we must ask, "Did that free will somehow thwart God's plan?" If so, then man, not God, is sovereign, which again is not very comforting. Either our God resigns, or He reigns.

But many Christians are afraid to affirm the absolute sovereignty of God because they think it then follows that men do not have free will and that God is then responsible for evil. They explain God's sovereignty by saying that He simply *foreknew* what would happen (because knows everything in advance), but He did *not predetermine* or ordain everything. But this makes man sovereign, because it makes God's plan for the ages depend on what man would do, not on what God determined in advance to do.

The Bible clearly affirms the absolute, total sovereignty of God over His creation, His absolute holiness, and, at the same time, the full responsibility of human beings as moral agents under God's sovereignty. God's sovereignty and human responsibility are true and true at the same time, but God's sovereignty is the basis

for everything else, and must therefore take supremacy and never be diminished in order to affirm human responsibility. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (III:1) strikes the balance this way:

God, from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

Scripture clearly affirms that God works all things after the counsel of His will, not man's will (Eph. 1:11). At the same time and because God is sovereign, men are responsible to obey Him and submit to His sovereignty. So a proper understanding of God's sovereignty is essential for proper obedience to Him.

We see both truths clearly in Genesis 17. Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, God appears to Abram and says: "I am God Almighty ["El Shaddai"]; Walk before Me and be blameless" (17:1). God is sovereign; man is responsible to obey Him. Then God clearly spells out what He will do with and for Abraham (17:2-8). There isn't much human free will or room for debate in these verses! God doesn't ask Abram's opinion, even on the personal matter of changing the 99-year-old man's name! He simply announces, "This is the way it's going to be; this is what I'm going to do." Period!

There follows another command (17:9), reflecting Abraham's responsibility to keep God's covenant. This is followed by more divine pronouncements about what is going to happen. God changes Sarai's name, He tells Abraham that He will give him a son by her and make her the mother of nations. When Abraham asks that Ishmael, his son by Hagar, might be God's chosen one, God denies the request, while still assenting to bless Ishmael. But God sovereignly chooses to establish His covenant with Isaac (17:21). The chapter ends with Abraham's obedience to God, as he and all the males in his household are circumcised. So the two major themes of this chapter are: (1) God will accomplish His sovereign purpose; (2) God's people are responsible to keep His covenant with them. God's sovereignty and man's responsibility, both in the

same context. But God's sovereignty is clearly the supreme factor, undergirding everything. We see that ...

Because God is absolutely sovereign, we must walk in obedience before Him, no matter how difficult.

1. God is absolutely sovereign.

The Bible starts with God, not with man: "In the beginning, God ..." (Gen. 1:1). Who God is has definite implications for how we should live. Here God appears to Abram and announces, "I am El Shaddai [God Almighty]." This is the first of 48 uses of this name for God in the Old Testament (31 times in Job). Though there is debate among Hebrew scholars, it probably comes from a word meaning "mountain," thus pointing to God's strength and stability. The Septuagint (200 B.C.) and the Latin Vulgate translated it, "all-powerful." In the context of Genesis 17, God is clearly the sovereign One, telling Abram what He as God is going to do and how He expects Abram to obey. This name points to God as the One who has the power to carry out His purposes and promises. Abram's response of falling on his face before God (17:3, 17) shows that Abram knew who is Lord and who is not!

God's sovereignty is fundamental to His very nature as God. A non-sovereign God isn't God at all. R. C. Sproul was once teaching on this. He began the class by reading from the part of the Westminster Confession I cited above, "God, from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass." He stopped at this point and asked, "Is there anyone in this room who does not believe the words that I just read?" Many hands went up. He then asked, "Are there any convinced atheists in the room?" No hands were raised. He then said, "Everyone who raised his hand to the first question should also have raised his hand to the second question." He went on to argue that if there is a single molecule in the universe running around loose, totally free of God's sovereignty, then we have no guarantee that a single promise of God will ever be fulfilled. That one maverick molecule could perhaps lay waste all of God's plans and promises toward us. He concluded, "Without sovereignty God cannot be God" (*Chosen By God* [Tyndale], pp. 25-27).

- A. God's sovereignty means that He initiates, follows through, and fulfills His purpose in His timing and way.

Note the authoritative manner in which God tells Abram what is going to happen. He repeatedly states, "I will," and "you shall" (17:2-8). God doesn't dicker or feel Abram out for his opinion. God announces, God commands, God reveals what He has already determined to do. Abram did not set up this interview and he didn't determine when it would end. God appears without being summoned, tells Abram what is going to happen, and (17:22), "when He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham." God's sovereignty means that God, not man, determines the course of human history and works it out in His time-table and way, not ours.

God's sovereignty extends over the salvation of men. It is here that many people stumble. They think that God is not fair if He saves some and not others. But Scripture is quite clear that it is God and not men who sovereignly determines who will be saved. We have already seen how God sovereignly chose Abram when he was dwelling in Ur of the Chaldees, living as a pagan. God did not choose Abram's countrymen or neighbors. He did not choose Abram's father or brothers. He chose Abram. Here God tells Abram that while He will bless Ishmael and his descendants in a material and temporal way, His covenant will be established with Isaac (17:20-21).

Was God unfair to Ishmael? Is He unfair to anyone who is not chosen to salvation? Only if Ishmael and those not chosen deserve to be saved. If anyone deserves to be saved and God does not save him, God is most unfair. But if all deserve His judgment and He sovereignly chooses to save some, that is His prerogative as God. As Paul argues in Romans 9:19-23, we who are clay dare not challenge the Potter's sovereign right to do as He pleases with what He has made. Those not chosen for salvation get precisely what they deserve, namely, God's justice. But God is not unfair to any by showing mercy to some. In fact, if God had not chosen certain ones unto salvation, none could ever be saved, because the "natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he *cannot* understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Cor. 2:14, italics mine).

Why do I emphasize this? It's not just an abstract theological point that's interesting to debate. The doctrine of God's sovereignty is important for a proper understanding of salvation. If you think that you are responsible for your own salvation, whether through your good deeds, your free will, or your faith, you will not despair of yourself and cast your hopeless self upon the sovereign mercy of God. But if you come to the end of yourself and realize that there is nothing in you deserving of God's salvation, then, with the tax collector in Jesus' story, you cry out in desperation, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner" (Luke 18:13). It is then that you are saved.

The doctrine of God's sovereignty is also the foundation for a life of submission and trust, because it humbles our pride and it assures us that God will prevail and that those who oppose Him will ultimately lose. It's at the heart of all Christian service, because it assures us that our labor is not in vain in the Lord. It enables us to endure trials and to wait upon God, even as Abraham did, because we know that in God's perfect time, He will do what He has promised, even if we are persecuted or suffer and die. Thus God's sovereignty means that He initiates, follows through, and fulfills His purpose in His timing and way, as seen here in His dealings with Abraham.

But, why did God make Abraham wait so long before He gave him Isaac? Why wouldn't God let Ishmael do?

B. God's sovereignty means that He gets all the glory and man gets none.

Abraham's response in verse 18 shows that by this time, he was quite content with Ishmael as the promised son. In these 13 years, Abraham had grown quite attached to the boy, in spite of the jealousy between Sarah and Hagar. But God definitely rejects Ishmael and states that Sarah will bear Abraham a son and that this son will be the one with whom God will establish His covenant.

Why not Ishmael? Because Ishmael represented man's effort helping God out (Gal. 4:29). In Ishmael, Abram could boast, because he was able to produce a son. But by the time Isaac came along, both Abraham and Sarah were humanly beyond their ability to reproduce. They could take none of the credit. All the glory went to God. God's delay with Abraham and Sarah brought them

to the end of themselves so that His grace got all the credit. If our proud flesh can grab any glory for itself, it will. That's why God waits until we come to the end of ourselves.

Again, this is true of salvation. If we think that we can contribute anything to our own salvation, we'll take the credit. If we think we came to Christ by our own free will, we'll boast in our wise choice. If we think it was by our faith, we'll boast in our great faith. If we think it was by our rational ability, we'll boast in our great intellect. But if our salvation depends solely on God's sovereign election, and if God chose those who were foolish, weak, and despised, then no man can boast before God (1 Cor. 1:27-31).

We struggle with the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty because it kills the flesh. We can't take any credit for our salvation if it is totally of God and not at all from us. By the flesh, we can produce an Ishmael, and it's good enough for us. But God doesn't work that way. He wants to bring us all to the end of ourselves, and then He gives us Isaac as a free gift, so that we bow before Him, lost in wonder, even as Abraham laughed in astonishment at what God was going to do (17:17). The only way to come to terms with God's sovereignty is to submit and let God be God.

But does this mean that we then kick back passively and do nothing? Not at all. A proper understanding of God's sovereignty should motivate us to walk in obedience:

2. We are responsible to walk in obedience before Him, no matter how difficult.

It is because He is God Almighty that we are to walk before Him and be blameless (17:1). It is because He has sovereignly established His covenant and because He will carry it out that we are to keep His covenant (17:2-9). Note two things:

- A. We are responsible to walk obediently.

Verse 1 may be translated, "Walk before Me and you shall be blameless." Blameless does not mean perfection, which no believer attains in this life. This word is used to describe both Noah (Gen. 6:9) and Job (Job 1:8), yet neither man was sinlessly perfect. The meaning of the word is "whole," or "having integrity." It refers to a person who walks honestly and openly before God, who fears God

and seeks to obey Him, and who confesses and turns away from sin. The word “walk” implies a step by step process. A walk is not spectacular and not a quick fix. But if you keep walking in the same direction, eventually you will get where you’re going. For the believer, that direction is holiness.

Sometimes, frankly, obedience is a struggle. If Abraham struggled over God’s rejection of Ishmael, there is no word in Scripture. And if he struggled over the command to be circumcised, there is not a hint of it here. His obedience was thorough and instant (17:23, 26). But it wasn’t easy.

B. We are responsible to obey even when it’s not easy.

There are several difficult things in this story that Abraham had to submit to. First was his *name change*. It was hard enough to be named “Exalted Father” (Abram) when he didn’t have any children. But at least with the birth of Ishmael the sting was mitigated. But now, before the birth of Isaac, God tells the 99-year-old Abram that he gets a new name: “Father of a Multitude” (Abraham)! If his name was an embarrassment before, what now? It would be like a totally bald man named Harry whom God told, “Now you’re going to be called, Bushy-headed Harry.” Abraham would have been the butt of every joke around!

Then there was this matter of *circumcision*. And it wasn’t just a private matter that Abraham could take care of behind closed doors. He had to do it to every male in his extended household! It wasn’t just the excruciating physical pain that was difficult to endure. This rite permanently disfigured a man at the place of his virility, where he would most want to blend in with everyone else. Why couldn’t God just make the sign of the covenant be a tattoo on the arm or an earring or something?

By submitting to God’s command for circumcision, Abraham was yielding his procreative powers totally to God. He was acknowledging his total dependence on God to produce the promised heir. It meant Abraham’s putting no confidence in his flesh, but rather trusting God totally to do what He promised to do so that all the glory goes to Him.

In the case of the men who followed Abraham, circumcision pictured the importance of sexual purity in obedience to God. It

set the Hebrews apart, so that if a Hebrew young man decided to have sexual relations with a pagan woman, she couldn't help noticing that he was different. At that point, he would be reminded that he belonged to the living God, and he would be faced with a rather awkward witnessing situation!

The application is, obedience to God is often difficult, and it sets you apart as distinct from our wicked culture, so that you may become the object of ridicule. But because our God is the sovereign God, the God who has chosen us and entered into His covenant with us, we are responsible to obey Him, even when it is difficult or embarrassing.

Conclusion

I believe that a major cause of the worldliness and impurity that permeates the modern evangelical church is that we have a watered-down view of the sovereignty and supremacy of our God. It was when Abraham had this vision of God as God Almighty, who sovereignly gives and keeps His covenant with a man who had messed up as often as Abraham had, that he obeyed without question. Recovering a proper vision of the Sovereign God is the basis for obedience, even when it's not easy.

Pastor John Piper tells of a time when he felt impressed to preach on God's greatness as revealed in Isaiah 6. Normally he would have tried to apply the text, but on this Sunday, he simply tried to lift up and display the majesty and glory of God, without a word of application. He did not realize that one of the young families in his church had just discovered that their child was being sexually abused by a close relative. They were there that Sunday and heard his message.

Piper says that many advisors to us pastors would have said, "Pastor Piper, can't you see that your people are hurting? Can't you come down out of the heavens and get practical? Don't you realize what kind of people sit in front of you on Sunday?" Some weeks later he learned the story. The husband took him aside after a service and said, "John, these have been the hardest months of our lives. Do you know what has gotten me through? The vision of the greatness of God's holiness that you gave me the first week in January. It has been the rock we could stand on."

Piper concludes, "The greatness and glory of God are relevant. It does not matter if surveys turn up a list of perceived needs that does not include the supreme greatness of the sovereign God of grace. That is the deepest need. Our people are starving for God." (*The Supremacy of God in Preaching* [Baker], pp. 10-11.)

I direct your attention to the Sovereign, Covenant-making, Covenant-keeping God. When you see Him as God Almighty, you will be able to join Abraham in walking in obedience before Him, even when it is difficult, as it often is.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the explanation that God's election is simply due to His foreknowledge not biblically sound?
2. How can God be absolutely sovereign and yet not responsible for sin and evil?
3. One popular author says that God has done all He can do to bring all to heaven, and now it's up to our choice. Why is this not biblically defensible?
4. Some argue that if God sovereignly predetermines everything, it makes the warnings of Scripture a sham. Your response?

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