

Doctrine of God

God's Sovereignty

"Our God is in the heavens, he does all that he pleases." – Psalm 115:3

"In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will."
- Ephesians 1:11

"God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own free will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, or is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."
– *Westminster Confession of Faith* 3.1

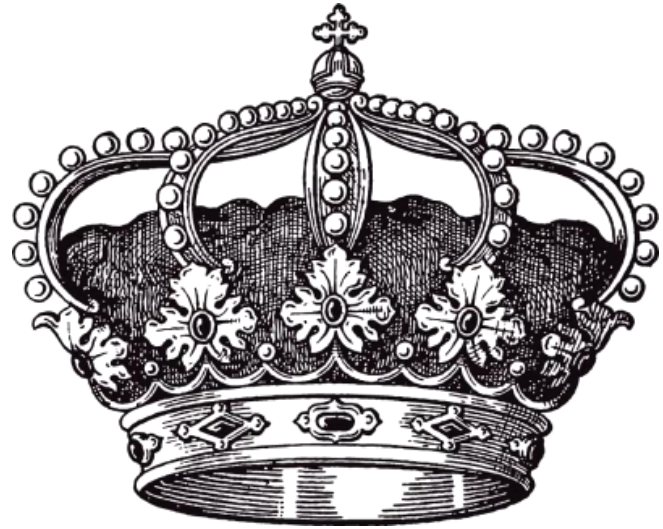
"We will never be saved unless God chooses to save us. Election leads to the saving action of God in his lordship, and if we were left to ourselves we would never respond to God on our own at all." – J.I. Packer

"His is the only sovereignty; and there is no sovereignty anywhere but it is derived from His Lordship. His is the sole prerogative to establish the law for all the universe, to judge the creature, and to execute his will. There is no criterion above or next to God, whereby He can be measured and judged, to which He must conform Himself. There is no law to which He is subject, no tribunal to which He is responsible. He alone is the standard for all law and righteousness. He is the sole High One."
- Herman Hoeksema

I. God's Sovereignty Explained

"The sovereignty of God I take to be the absolute authority, rule, and government of God in the whole of that reality that exists distinct from Himself in the realms of nature and of grace."
- John Murray

"God's Sovereign will is his faculty of self-determination, his supreme capacity to act intentionally (on purpose) and preferentially (as he pleases), to form desires and to make and fix decisions: by which, in its perceptive function, he comprehensively defines morality and propriety, openly demands the same from his moral creatures, and sincerely desires their compliance; and by which, in its decretive function, he designed and determined in eternity everything that happens in history" - Greg Nichols



- **Election** – God chooses to save his people. The verb the Bible uses for “elect” means “to select” or “choose.”
- **Predestination** – God’s sovereign plan to save out of the world a particular people.
- **Conditional Election** – God chooses his people based upon their choosing Him. This is the classic Arminian understanding of election. The condition upon which God elects his people is their freely chosen faith in Christ.
- **Unconditional Election** – “The biblical doctrine of election is that before Creation God selected out of the human race, foreseen as fallen, those whom he would redeem, bring to faith, justify, and glorify in and through Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:28-39; Eph. 1:3-14; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:9-10). This divine choice is an expression of free and sovereign grace, for it is unconstrained and unconditional, not merited by anything in those who are its subjects.” (from *Concise Theology* by J.I. Packer)
- God owes sinners no mercy of any kind, only condemnation; so it is a wonder, and matter for endless praise, that he should choose to save any of us; and doubly so when his choice involved the giving of his own Son to suffer as sin-bearer for the elect (Rom. 8:32).

II. God’s Sovereignty in the Scriptures

The Biblical Language:

1. The verb to “choose” or to “elect” (*eklego*) is found twenty-two times in the New Testament. It is used eight times of Christ’s choosing or electing his disciples (Luke 6:13; John 6:70; 13:18; 15:16 (twice),19; Acts 1:2; 2:4). On one occasion Jesus is himself the person chosen (Luke 9:35). Six times it is used in a context that does not pertain to salvation (Luke 10:42; 14:7; Acts 6:5; 15:7,22,25). The remaining seven occurrences refer to men and women as the objects of election to eternal life (Mark 13:20; Acts 13:17; 1 Cor. 1:27 (twice),28; Eph. 1:4; James 2:5).
2. The noun “elect” (*eklektos*) is also used twenty-two times in the New Testament. On three occasions Jesus is the “elect” one (Luke 23:35; 1 Peter 2:4,6), and in one text the word refers to angels (1 Tim. 5:21). There is also one passage in which the word has no bearing on salvation (Rom. 16:13). In the seventeen remaining cases the word is used of men and women as God’s “elect,” those chosen to eternal life (Matt. 22:14; 24:22,24,31; Mark 13:20,22,27; Luke 18:7; Rom. 8:33; Col. 3:12; 2 Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1; 2:9; 2 John 1,13; Rev. 17:14).
3. The word which means “election” (*ekloge*) is used seven times, all of which refer to salvation (Acts 9:15; Rom. 9:11; 11:5,7,28; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Peter 1:10).
4. The word frequently translated “to predestine” or “to predestinate” (*proorizo*) is found six times in the New Testament. It is used once with reference to Christ’s sufferings (Acts 4:28), once of the predestination of God’s redemptive plan (1 Cor. 2:7), and four times of the predestination of people to salvation (Rom. 8:29,30; Eph. 1:5,11).

Various Supporting Texts:

- **John 6:39**; **10:29**; **17:2, 24** – The elect are the Father’s gift to the Son.
- **John 6:37-40**; **10:14-16, 26-29**; **15:16**; **17:6-26**; **Eph 5:25-27** – Jesus testifies that he came into the world to save those whom the Father gave him.
- **Ephesians 1:1-14** – Paul explains our being “in Christ” is due to our having been chosen by God before the foundations of the world. God “works all things” (including the salvation of his people) in accordance to the council of His own will.

- **Romans 8:28-30** – God’s foreknowledge in this context is not merely his foreknowledge of facts. Rather Paul is referencing God’s foreknowledge of persons. God “foreknew” His elect. That is, before the foundation of the world, God knew his own by name.
- **Romans 9** – Paul explains to Jewish Christians why so many Jews have rejected the Messiah. In so doing he explains that salvation from start to finish is wholly a work of God’s sovereign grace.
- **John 6:35-40, 44** – Jesus locates the reality of our coming to Him entirely in the sovereign will of God.
- **Acts 14:48** – All those appointed unto eternal life will believe.
- **1 Peter 2:9** – “For you are a chosen people...”
- **2 Peter 1:10** – “...be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure.”
- **1 Thess 1:4-5** – “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,”
- **2 Thess 2:13** – “But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.”
- **2 Tim 1:8-9** – “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.”

III. God’s Sovereignty is Comprehensive

A. Over Nature and Weather

Psalms 104; 105:16; 135:7; 147:7-20; 148; Job 9:5-10; 26:5-14; 37:1-24; 38:8-38; Mark 4:39,41.
Other texts:

- "It is He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom; and by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens. When He utters His voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and He causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain, and brings out the wind from His storehouses" (Jer. 10:12-13).
- "Are there any among the idols of the nations who give rain? Or can the heavens grant showers? Is it not Thou, O Lord our God? Therefore we hope in Thee, for Thou art the one who hast done all these things" (Jer. 14:22).
- "And furthermore [declares the Lord], I withheld the rain from you while there were still three months until harvest. Then I would send rain on one city and on another city I would not send rain; one part would be rained on, while the part not rained on would dry up" (Amos 4:7).

B. Over Kings and Nations

Daniel 1:2 (cf. Jer. 25:1-12; Isa. 10:5-14)

- "*the Lord gave*" . . . Ultimately it was neither the sin and weakness of Jehoiakim nor the brilliance and strength of Nebuchadnezzar, but the sovereign pleasure of Yahweh that determined the historical outcome (cf. Dan. 2:20-23). The Israelites "are not mere pawns on a political and geographical chessboard. To be in the hand of Nebuchadnezzar is not to be out of the control of God" (Goldingay, 22).
- See also Daniel 2:37-38; 4:25,30,32; 5:18,20,21; Isaiah 10:5-13; 40:23-24

C. Over People and their Hearts

Prov. 21:1; 16:9; Exodus 3:21-22; 34:23-24; Deut. 2:30; Joshua 11:20; Judges 7:2-3,22; 1 Sam. 14:6,15,20; 2 Sam. 17:14; 1 Kings 12:15; 20:28-29; 2 Chron. 13:14-16; Ezra 1:1,5; 6:22; 7:27; Isa. 45:4-5; Acts 4:27-28; 2 Cor. 8:16-17; Rev. 17:17.

- Genesis 20:6 – “Then God said to him in the dream, “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.”
- Exodus 12:36 – “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.”
- Acts 4:27-28 – “...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.”

D. Over the Closing and Opening of the Womb

- Gen. 16:2; 29:31; 1 Sam. 1:5; Judges 13:3.

E. Over Everything (including evil) in General

Exodus 4:11 (disease and disability); Job 2:10 (cf. James 5:11); 42:2; Ps. 115:3; Prov. 16:33; 21:31; Isa. 45:7 (virtually all of Isa. 42-48); Lam. 3:37-38; Daniel 4:32,35; Amos 3:6; Matthew 10:29-31; Acts 4:27-28; Eph. 1:11.

- Genesis 50:20 – “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.”
- Isaiah 45:7 – “I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things.”
- 2 Corinthians 12:7 – “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.”



F. Over Life and Death

- Deut. 32:39; 1 Samuel 2:6-7 2 Samuel 12:15; James 4:14-15.

G. Over the actions of animals

- When the Assyrians populated Samaria with foreigners, *2 Kings 17:25* says, "Therefore the LORD sent lions among them which killed some of them."
- In *Daniel 6:22*, Daniel says to the king, "My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths." Other Scriptures speak of God commanding birds and bears and donkeys and large fish to do his bidding. Which means that all calamities that are owing to animal life are ultimately in the control of God. If God can shut the mouth of a ravenous lion, then he can shut the mouth of a malaria-carrying mosquito and nullify every other animal that kills.

H. Divine Sovereignty in Proverbs

1. *over the actions and words of His human creatures* (16:1-3, 9)

- For all its emphasis on wisdom and prudence, Proverbs nevertheless teaches that man's ways are ultimately determined by divine providence.
- Note esp. vv. 2, 9. "God holds an even balance and critically tests the genuineness of the impulses which motivated the deed. Accordingly, man should not be guided by his own judgment but apply the criterion, how will it be judged by God?" (Cohen, 103).
- In v. 3, "works" refers not to those already performed, but "projected actions" or "plans", as in vv. 1-2. See 19:21. "To confide one's projects to Yahweh implies an element of resignation to Yahweh's will, a willingness to give up anything which clashes with Yahweh's resolve and so a

quest for attunement and harmony. This is the way for man to proceed if he wishes to ensure that his plans will not be nullified by Yahweh's veto and so fail of implementation" (McKane, 497).

- As for v. 9, "a man may plan his road to the last detail, but he cannot implement his planning unless it coincides with Yahweh's plan for him. He is deluded if he supposes that he has unfettered control and can impose his will on every situation without limitation in order to make his plan a reality, for it is Yahweh who orders his steps" (McKane, 495-96).

2. *over the destiny of the wicked* (16:4)

- There are no loose ends in God's providential rule of the world: even the wicked are under his oversight. Note well: there is a difference between making a person to condemn him/her, and appointing a person to condemnation for his/her wickedness. God has appointed all things and all people to their proper end that he might receive all the glory.

3. *over "random" events* (16:33)

- The casting of lots was often used in the OT to determine God's will. See Lev. 16:7-10,21,22; Joshua 7:14 (cf. 1 Sam. 14:42); 14:2; 18:6; 1 Chron. 6:54ff.; 25:7,8; 26:13ff; Neh. 10:34ff. See also Matt. 27:35; Acts 1:26. Although the decision is reached by a seemingly arbitrary process, God is in absolute control. As someone said, "Man throws the dice, but God makes the spots turn up!"

4. *over the decisions of rulers* (21:1)

- In much the same way that an irrigator might cut a watercourse in any direction he desires, so God sways the heart of a king, even an unbelieving one. See Gen. 20:6; Exod. 4:21; 7:3; 9:16; 10:1-2; 14:4-5; Isaiah 10:5-19; 45:1-13; Ezra 1:1,5 (Cyrus, king of Persia); Jer. 25:3-14; Hab. 1:5-11; Acts 4:25-28; Rev. 17:16-17.

5. *over the battle and its outcome* (21:30-31) - See also Ps. 20:7; 33:13-17; Isa. 31:1-3.

6. *over the souls of His human creatures* (24:12c; 18:10; 30:5b)

- This is why Charles Spurgeon, the London pastor from 100 years ago said:
"I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes - that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens - that the chaff from the hand of the winnower is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence - the fall of . . . leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche."
• When Spurgeon was challenged that this is nothing but fatalism and stoicism, he replied, "What is fate? Fate is this - *Whatever is, must be*. But there is a difference between that and Providence. Providence says, *Whatever God ordains, must be*; but the wisdom of God never ordains anything without a purpose. Everything in this world is working for some great end. Fate does not say that. . . . There is all the difference between fate and Providence that there is between a man with good eyes and a blind man."

IV. God's Sovereignty and God's Will

To speak of God's sovereignty is to speak of his supreme will. That is, because God is sovereign, whatsoever He wills comes to pass.

*Deep in unfathomable mines
With never failing skill
He fashions all his bright designs
And works His sovereign will*
- William Cowper

A. The Unity of God's Will: one faculty

God wills. His will is not separate somehow from his desires or capability. All God's actions are voluntary and are not produced of necessity by forces acting upon him. His actions are always deliberate and according to the council of his own will. There is perfect unity between God's will and His actions. He does whatsoever He pleases.

God's supreme will is the expression of His resolve and determination. He wills nothing half-heartedly or reluctantly as though he must choose the lesser of two evils. God's will is always in perfect harmony with His desires. By His will God brings about all things that come to pass.

B. The Duality of God's Will: two functions

There are not two wills in God. He is not torn by competing desires or inner conflicts. There is no difference between what God desires and what God wills to happen. Nor is there a difference between what God wills to happen and what actually comes to pass.

However, we may speak of there being two functions in God's one will. These two functions are distinct but in perfect harmony.

1. God's will functionally revealed

- Ezra 10:11; Ps. 5:4; 40:8; Jer. 31:34; Ezek. 18:23; 33:11; Heb. 13:21; Matt. 6:10; 23:37; Rom. 2:4; Phil. 2:13

a) Comprehensively defines morality.

- God's revealed will defines what is right and good according to God's character and reveals the boundaries of human behavior.

b) Declares what is required of God's human creatures.

- It pleases God when His people live according to his revealed will.

c) Expresses God's desire for compliance.

- God makes it clear what he requires of his human creatures. God works in his people hearts to conform their desires to his will.


2. God's will functionally decreed

- Job 23:13; 1 Sam. 2:25; Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Isa. 14:24; Dan. 4:35; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; Rom. 9:18-20; Eph. 1:11; James 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:8-9
- God's eternal decree (sometimes known as his secret will) is the determinative cause of whatsoever comes to pass. God's decretive will can never be frustrated or overthrown.

V. Doesn't God want everyone to be saved?

- 1 Timothy 2:3-4 – "This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."
- The scope of the word "all" has to be determined by the context. In some texts the word "all" is inclusive of everyone and everything without exception (Acts 10:38; Eph 1:11; Col 1:17, 20). In other cases the

word “all” refers to all things within a restricted sphere – all of a specified sort (Rom 14:2; I Cor 1:5; 6:12; 10:23; Phil 4:13). In still other contexts the word “all” refers to all kinds or all sorts – that is to say without distinction (Matt 9:35; 10:1; Luke 11:42; Acts 10:12; I Tim 6:10; and I Tim 2:4).

- God did not attempt to save everyone who would ever live. If this were the case then God failed miserably. But the redemptive purposes of God could never fail. He would not leave the success of His supreme act of grace up to the sinful wills and whims of man. The cross work of Christ has universalized redemption in that it is offered to Jew and Gentile from every nation without distinction (“all”). Disciples will come from every nation, language, and tribe. Incidentally, how can God promise that believers will come from every corner of the earth if He has not decreed it to be so? Is this great promise grounded in the eternal and gracious purposes of God or simply because he foresaw that it would happen of people’s own free will?
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- **2 Peter 3:9 – “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”**
 - Again, what does the context demand of the word “all” in this passage?
 - Peter is making the point to his original readers that the Lord delays His return not from negligent inattentiveness but out of longsuffering toward His people. He is not willing that any of them should perish. It is the Father’s will to lose none of those whom He has given to the Son (John 6:39).
 - To who are Peter’s epistles addressed?
 - Peter is writing “to the elect.” He is not writing to a general audience. Nor is he writing to everyone in the entire world. Throughout his two epistles Peter has a specific audience in mind and this through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Do we not do the same thing? When we enter our home, classroom, or office we do not ask “Is everyone here?” or “Are we all here?” anticipating to find over 6 ½ billion people present. Rather we are addressing those who are supposed to be there.
 - Context is king! Beyond the recipients of Peter’s epistle notice also the wording of verse nine: “...but is patient toward *you*, not wishing that *any* should perish...” “You” and “any” are referring to the same group – the elect to whom Peter is writing.
 - Others see II Peter 3:9 as reflective of God’s two wills. That is, God has both a revealed will that we can know from Scripture and a decretive will or will of decree that we cannot know. It is God’s secret will which sometimes for His own purposes differs from His revealed will.
 - This doctrine is important because it does justice to the fact that there are texts of Scripture that clearly teach that God’s will cannot be overcome or resisted. And yet we also know that God’s will is resisted regularly. Remember the examples of Joseph’s brothers and Christ’s cross. In both cases God’s revealed will is disobeyed – People shouldn’t sell their brothers into slavery nor should they betray and crucify the Son of God. And yet by God’s own secret and wise decree these things happened to accomplish His perfect plan.
 - This indicates the two functions of God’s will. His revealed will is resisted and disobeyed regularly. But His secret will of decree cannot be finally resisted by man. God was going to use Joseph to help save a nation from starvation. The means He used was the brother’s sinful betrayal. Likewise, God was going to provide the ultimate sacrifice for sins through the death of His Son. The means for this sacrifice would be the sinful actions of certain Jewish religious leaders, Judas, and the Roman authorities.

VI. Is God the Author of Sin?

- Jonathan Edwards answers:

If by 'the author of sin,' be meant the sinner, the agent, or the actor of sin, or the *doer* of a wicked thing . . . it would be a reproach and blasphemy, to suppose God to be the author of sin. In this sense, I utterly deny God to be the author of sin." But, he argues, willing that sin exist in the world is not the same as sinning. "God does not commit sin in willing that there be sin. God has established a world in which sin will indeed necessarily come to pass by God's permission, but not by his "positive agency."

- God is, Edwards says, "the permitter . . . of sin; and at the same time, a disposer of the state of events, in such a manner, for wise, holy and most excellent ends and purposes, that sin, if it be permitted . . . will most certainly and infallibly follow."

- Thus in one sense God wills that which he hates come to pass, as well as what he loves. Edwards says,

God may hate a thing as it is in itself, and considered simply as evil, and yet . . . it may be his will it should come to pass, considering all consequences. . . . God doesn't will sin as sin or for the sake of anything evil; though it be his pleasure so to order things, that he permitting, sin will come to pass; for the sake of the great good that by his disposal shall be the consequence. *His willing to order things so that evil should come to pass, for the sake of the contrary good, is no argument that he doesn't hate evil, as evil: and if so, then it is no reason why he many not reasonably forbid evil as evil, and punish it as such.*

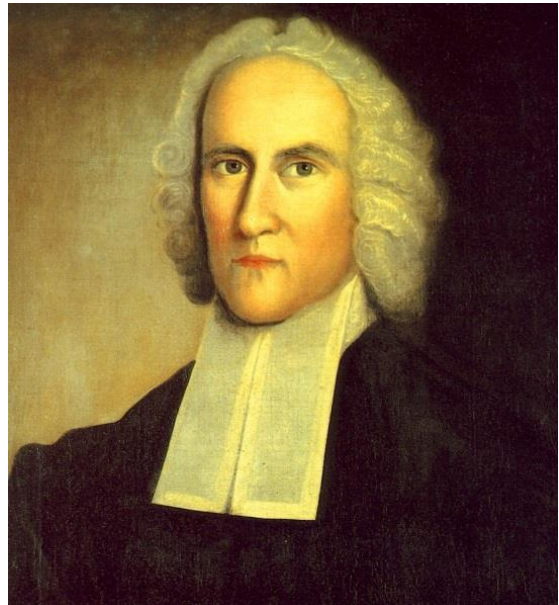
Why Does God Ordain that there Be Evil?

- It is evident from what has been said that it is not because he delights in evil as evil. Rather he "wills that evil come to pass . . . that good may come of it." What good? And how does the existence of evil serve this good end? Here is Edwards' stunning answer:

It is a proper and excellent thing for infinite glory to shine forth; and for the same reason, it is proper that the shining forth of God's glory should be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth, that every beauty should be proportionably effulgent, that the beholder may have a proper notion of God. It is not proper that one glory should be exceedingly manifested, and another not at all. . . ."

Thus it is necessary, that God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God's glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all.

If it were not right that God should decree and permit and punish sin, there could be no manifestation of God's holiness in hatred of sin, or in showing any preference, in his providence, of godliness before it. There would be no manifestation of God's grace or true goodness, if there was no sin to be



pardoned, no misery to be saved from. How much happiness soever he bestowed, his goodness would not be so much prized and admired. . . .

So evil is necessary, in order to the highest happiness of the creature, and the completeness of that communication of God, for which he made the world; because the creature's happiness consists in the knowledge of God, and the sense of his love. And if the knowledge of him be imperfect, the happiness of the creature must be proportionably imperfect.'