

What a Sovereign God Cannot Do

By Dave Hunt

One of the most common expressions one hears in Christian circles, especially for reassurance when things aren't going well, is that "God is in control, He's still on the throne." Christians comfort themselves with these words—but what do they mean? Was God not "in control" when Satan rebelled and when Adam and Eve disobeyed, but now He is? Does God's being in control mean that all the rape, murder, war and multiplied evil is exactly what He planned and desires?

Christ asks us to pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Why that prayer if we are already in God's kingdom with Satan bound, as John Calvin taught and Reconstructionists claim today? Could a world of rampant evil really be what God wills? Surely not!

"Wait a minute!" someone counters. "Are you suggesting that our omnipotent God is unable to effect His will upon earth? What heresy is this! Paul clearly says that God 'worketh all things after the counsel of his own will' ([Ephesians 1:11](#))."

Yes. But the Bible itself contains many examples of men defying God's will and disobeying Him. God laments, "I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me" ([Isaiah 1:2](#)). The sacrifices they offer Him and their evil lives are obviously not according to His will. We are told that "the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected for themselves the counsel of God" ([Luke 7:30](#)). Christ's statement in [Matthew 7:21](#) shows clearly that everyone doesn't always do God's will. That is implied also in [Isaiah 65:12](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:17-19](#); [Hebrews 10:36](#); [1 Peter 2:15](#); [1 John 2:17](#) and many other scriptures. In fact, [Ephesians 1:11](#) doesn't say that everything that happens is according to God's will, but according to "the counsel" of His will. Clearly the counsel of God's will has given man freedom to disobey Him. There is no other explanation for sin.

Yet in his zeal to protect God's sovereignty from any challenge, A. W. Pink argues earnestly, "God fore-ordains everything which comes to pass....God initiates all things, regulates all things...." 1 Edwin H. Palmer agrees: "God is in back of everything. He decides and causes all things to happen that do happen....He has foreordained everything 'after the counsel of his will' ([Ephesians 1:11](#)): the moving of a finger...the mistake of a typist—even sin." 2

Right here we confront a vital distinction. It is one thing for God, in His sovereignty and without diminishing that sovereignty, to give man the power to rebel against Him. This would open the door for sin as solely man's responsibility by a free choice. It is something entirely different for God to control everything to such an extent that He must effectively cause man to sin.

It is a fallacy to imagine that for God to be in control of His universe He must therefore foreordain and initiate everything. Thus He causes sin, then punishes the sinner. To justify this view, it is argued that "God is under no obligation to extend His grace to those whom He predestines to eternal judgment." In fact, however, obligation has no relationship to grace.

It actually diminishes God's sovereignty to suggest that He cannot use to His own purposes what He doesn't foreordain and originate. There is neither logical nor biblical reason why a sovereign God by His own sovereign design could not allow creatures made in His image the freedom of genuine moral choice. And there are compelling reasons why He would do so.

Many an atheist (or sincere seeker who is troubled by evil and suffering) throws in our faces, "You claim your God is all-powerful. Then why doesn't He stop evil and suffering? If He could and doesn't, He's a monster; if He can't, then He isn't all-powerful!" The atheist thinks he has us cornered.

The answer involves certain things which God cannot do.

But God is infinite in power, so there must be nothing He can't do! Really? The very fact that He is infinite in power means He cannot fail. There is much else which finite beings do all the time but which the infinite, absolutely sovereign God cannot do because He is God: lie, cheat, steal, sin, be mistaken, etc. In fact, much else that God cannot do is vital for us to understand in meeting challenges from skeptics.

Tragically, there are many sincere questions which most Christians can't answer. Few parents have taken the time to think through the many intellectual and theological challenges their children increasingly face, challenges for which today's youth find no answers from so many pulpits and Sunday-school lessons. As a result, growing numbers of those raised in evangelical homes and churches are abandoning the "faith" they never adequately understood.

Is sovereignty and power the cure-all? Many Christians superficially think so. Yet there is much for which sovereignty and power are irrelevant. God acts not only sovereignly, but in love, grace, mercy, kindness, justice and truth. His sovereignty is exercised only in perfect harmony with all of His other attributes.

There is much that God cannot do, not in spite of who He is, but because of who He is. Even Augustine, described as the first of the early so-called Church Fathers who "taught the absolute sovereignty of God," 3 declared, "Wherefore, He cannot do some things for the very reason that He is omnipotent." 4

Because of His absolute holiness, it is impossible for God to do evil, to cause others to do evil or even to entice anyone into evil: "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted, neither tempteth he any man..." (James 1:13-14). But what about the many places in Scripture where it says God tempted someone or was tempted? For example, "God did tempt Abraham" (Genesis 22:1). The Hebrew word there and throughout the Old Testament is *nacah*, which means to test or prove, as in assaying the purity of a metal. It has nothing to do with tempting to sin. God was testing Abraham's faith and obedience.

If God cannot be tempted, why is Israel warned, "Ye shall not tempt the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 6:16)? We are even told that at Massah, in demanding water, "they tempted the Lord, saying, Is the LORD among us or not?" (Exodus 17:7). Later they "tempted God in their heart by asking meat for their lust... they said, Can God furnish a table in the wilderness? Yea...they provoked the most high" (Psalms 78:18, 56, 41).

God was not being tempted to do evil, He was being provoked, thus His patience was being tested. Instead of waiting upon Him obediently to meet their needs, His people were demanding that He use His power to give them what they wanted to satisfy their lusts. Their "temptation" of God was a blasphemous challenge forcing Him either to give in to their desire or to punish them for rebellion.

When Jesus was "tempted of the devil" to cast himself from the pinnacle of the temple to prove the promise that angels would bear Him up in their hands, He quoted, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God" (Matthew 4:1-11). In other words, to put ourselves deliberately in a place where God must act to protect us is tempting Him.

James goes on to say, "but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed." Temptation to evil does not come from without but from within. The man who could not possibly be "tempted" to be dishonest in business may succumb to the temptation to commit adultery and thus be dishonest with his wife. It is said that "every man has his price."

God was not tempting Adam and Eve to sin when He told them not to eat of a particular tree. Eve was tempted by her own lust and selfish desire. Even in innocence man could be selfish and disobedient. We see this in young infants who as yet presumably don't know the difference between right and wrong.

Additionally, there are a number of other things which God cannot do. God cannot deny Himself or contradict Himself. He cannot change. He cannot go back on His Word. Specifically in relationship to mankind, there are some things God cannot do which are very important to understand and to explain to others. One of the most fundamental concepts (and least understood by "religious" people) is this: He cannot forgive sin without the penalty being paid and accepted by man.

Are we saying that in spite of His sovereignty and infinite power God cannot forgive whomever He wills, He cannot simply wipe their slate clean in the heavenly record? Exactly: He cannot, because He is also perfectly just. "So are you suggesting," some complain, "that God wants to save all mankind but lacks the power to do so? It is a denial of God's omnipotence and sovereignty if there is anything He desires but can't accomplish." In fact, omnipotence and sovereignty are irrelevant with regard to forgiveness.

Christ in the Garden the night before the cross cried out, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me..." (Matthew 26:39). Surely if it had been possible to provide salvation any other way, the Father would have allowed Christ to escape the excruciating physical sufferings of the cross and the infinite spiritual agony of enduring the penalty His perfect justice had pronounced upon sin. But even for the omnipotent God there was no other way. It is important that we clearly explain this biblical and logical truth when we present the gospel.

Suppose a judge has before him a son, a daughter or other loved one found guilty of multiple murders by the jury. In spite of his love, the judge must uphold the penalty demanded by the law. Love cannot nullify justice. The only way God could forgive sinners and remain just would be for Christ to pay the penalty for sin (Romans 3:21-28).

There are two other matters of vital importance in relation to man's salvation which God cannot do: He cannot force anyone to love Him; and He cannot force anyone to accept a gift. By the very nature of love and giving, man must have the power to choose. The reception of God's love and of the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ can only be by an act of man's free will.

Some argue that if it were God's will for all men to be saved, the fact that all are not saved would mean that God's will would be frustrated and His sovereignty overturned by men. It is also argued that if man can say yes or no to Christ, he has the final say in his salvation and his will is stronger than God's will: "The heresy of free will dethrones God and enthrones man." 5

There is nothing in either the Bible or logic to suggest that God's sovereignty requires man to be powerless to make a real choice, moral or otherwise.

Giving man the power to make a genuine, independent choice does not diminish God's control over His universe. Being omnipotent and omniscient, God certainly could so arrange circumstances as to keep man's rebellion from frustrating His purposes. In fact, God could even use man's free will to help fulfill His own plans and thereby be even more glorified.

God's grand design from the foundation of the world to bestow upon man the Gift of His love precludes any ability to force that Gift upon any of His creatures. Both love and gifts of any kind must be received. Force perverts the transaction.

The fact that God cannot fail, lie, sin, change or deny Himself does not in the least diminish His sovereignty. Nor is He any the less sovereign because He cannot force anyone to love Him or to receive the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. And from man's side, the reverse limitation prevails: there is nothing anyone can do to merit or earn either love or a gift. They must be given freely from God's heart without any reason other than love, mercy and grace.

Wonderfully, in His sovereign grace, God has so constituted man and has so designed a gift that man may

receive it voluntarily by an act of his will and respond in love to God's love. Someone has said, "The free-will of man is the most marvelous of the Creator's works." 6 The power of choice opens the door to something wonderful beyond comprehension: genuine fellowship between God and man for eternity. Without a free will man could not receive the gift of eternal life, thus God could not give it to him.

Pusey points out that "Without free-will, man would be inferior to the lower animals, which have a sort of limited freedom of choice....It would be self-contradictory, that Almighty God should create a free agent capable of loving Him, without also being capable of rejecting His love...without free-will we could not freely love God. Freedom is a condition of love." 7

It is the power of genuine choice from man's own heart and will which God has sovereignly given him that enables God to love man and for man to receive that love and to love God in return "because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). It is impossible that the power of choice could challenge God's sovereignty since it is God's sovereignty which has bestowed this gift upon man and set the conditions for both loving and giving.

Suggesting that God would be lacking in "power" (thus denying His sovereignty) if He offered salvation and some rejected it is missing the point. Power and love do not belong in the same discussion. In fact, of the many things which we have seen that God cannot do, a lack of "power" is not the reason for any of them, nor is His sovereignty mitigated in the least by any of these.

Thus for mankind to have been given by God the power to choose to love Him or not and to receive or to reject the free gift of salvation, far from denying God's sovereignty, is to admit what God's sovereignty itself has lovingly and wonderfully provided.

May we willingly respond from the heart to His love with our love, and in gratitude for His great gift proclaim the good news to others. **TBC**

Endnotes

1 Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Baker Book House, 1984), 240. 2 Edwin H. Palmer, *the five points of Calvinism* (Baker Books, 1999), 25.

3 C. Norman Sellers, *Election and Perseverance* (Schoettle Publishing Co., 1987), 3.

4 Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God* (n.p.n.d.), V. 10.

5 W.E. Best, *Free Grace Versus Free Will* (W.E. Best Books Missionary Trust, 1977), 35.

6 Junius B. Reimensnyder, *Doom Eternal* (N.S. Quiney, 1880), 257; cited in Samuel Fisk, *Calvinistic Paths Retraced* (Biblical Evangelism Press, 1985), 223.

7 Edward B. Pusey, *What Is Of Faith As To Everlasting Punishment?* (James Parker & Co., 1881), 22-23; cited in Fisk, *op. cit.*, 222. ♦