

God's Sovereignty and Man's Free Will

A Muscle-Bound God?

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One of the debates in athletics, especially in boxing, is how much muscle is too much. It is suggested that when a fighter becomes too muscle-bound, their flexibility, quickness, and endurance are all compromised. In a theological equivalent, some have suggested that there are certain ways that God is limited due to His sovereignty which relates to His absolute and supreme power and authority over all things – including the wills of people.

Although the word “sovereign” does not appear in the Bible verses that portray God’s power and authority are clearly illustrated in the Scriptures.

There are many verses that reveal God is the superpower of the universe.

Genesis 17:1

“And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I [am] the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.

Revelation 16:7 also declares:

“And I heard another out of the altar say, Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous *are thy judgments.*”

1 Chronicles 16:25

“For great *is* the LORD, and greatly to be praised: he also *is* to be feared above all gods.”

Psalms 145:3

“Great *is* the LORD, and greatly to be praised; and his greatness *is* unsearchable.”

1 Timothy 1:17

“Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, *be* honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Many other Bible verses portray God as being fully in charge of the events of the universe.

Psalm 135:6

“Whatsoever the LORD pleased, *that* did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places.”

Psalm 103:19

“The LORD hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all.”

Proverbs 21:1

“The king's heart *is* in the hand of the LORD, *as* the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.”

Isaiah 45:7

“I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these *things*.”

Proverbs 16:33

“The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof [is] of the LORD.”

Lamentations 3:37

“Who *is* he *that* saith, and it cometh to pass, *when* the Lord commandeth *it* not?”

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Romans 9:20

“Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed *it*, Why hast thou made me thus?”

James 4:14-15

“Whereas ye know not what *shall be* on the morrow. For what *is* your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye *ought* to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.”

When you are as sovereign as God (possessing full power and authority), it is argued by the Calvinist that you can't allow others to have genuine free will or allow life to just play out. God is just too sovereign (muscle-bound) to allow such things. In other words, His power and authority overrides man's choices.

But is God really limited by the degree of His own capabilities? Are His capacities so great that they become self-limiting? In other words, must God limit the way He works because He has full power and authority? Does God's sovereignty mean He cannot allow certain things such as the free choices of people to bring about His sovereign purposes? Many Calvinists reason if God is not the total overpowering muscle man, excluding human choice, this would mean that He is no longer possessing full power and authority.

Following the logic, how does a sovereign and all-powerful God allow anything to exist outside of Himself? Since God is omniscient, does that mean that He can't allow ignorance to exist? Since God is omnipresent, does that mean that nothing else can fill any part of the same space? Since God is omnipotent, does that mean that only He can wield power? Of course, all of these things are allowed to exist outside of the personhood of God. The same is true regarding the volitional aspect of man's existence. Although God is sovereign it does not negate the fact that man can express personal faith in Christ as a result of the work of God taking place in his heart (John 6:47; Gal. 3:26; Rom. 4:3).

Although God is all-powerful, He sometimes chooses to limit His absolute power and authority to bring to pass His plan and purpose on earth. We find in Scripture that God places upon Himself self-imposed limitations in various ways but still brings about His purpose in relation to the salvation of souls and with all the events occurring on earth. God's way of expressing His sovereignty is not inconsistent with meaningful human decisions.

Acts 2:23

“Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God (*God's authority and will*), ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (*God permitting man to bring about His sovereign purposes*).

John 6:37

“All that the Father giveth me shall come to me (*God’s sovereign power and authority*); and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (*God allowing man to interact with His saving plan and purpose*).

Despite this, it is argued that because God is absolutely sovereign, He can’t create mankind to possess a free will that can repent (Acts 17:30) and believe (Acts 16:31). *But this point of view turns God’s unlimited ability into a limitation, which is contradictory.* We must understand that God exercises complete control over His unlimited capacities. In other words, God is always in complete control of whatever plan He devises and how He chooses to implement it. As the all-powerful and omnipotent God, He never changes – “I am the LORD, I change not” (Mal. 3:6).

This means He can do whatever He pleases without limiting His sovereignty. This certainly finds support in the Scriptures, such as 2 Thessalonians 2:13, which acknowledges both the unlimited nature of God’s divine power (“sanctification of the Spirit”) as well as the reality of man’s free will to bring about God’s saving purposes (“and belief of the truth”). Both can be true, and God loses none of His limitless power and sovereignty (His muscle) in bringing His purpose to pass.

Psalms 115:3

“But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased.”

The Calvinist says the unlimited power of a sovereign God becomes limited if man possesses a faculty of faith or the freedom to choose. According to Calvinism, this would essentially put limitations on God’s unlimited ability to do as He pleases. But this is man’s reasoning or “vain jangling” (babble – Tit. 1:6) – not God’s way in demonstrating His sovereignty and bringing His will and purpose to pass.

God “who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Eph. 1:11) also allows man’s choices to bring about His saving purpose in the world (“In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” – Eph. 1:13). This is not limiting God to a skinny man without muscles but is portraying God as being able to do whatever He wants to do since He is the all-powerful and unchanging God whose plans and purposes will always come to pass.



To say that God is all powerful and therefore cannot allow man to possess a choice regarding his eternal destiny is to conclude that the Almighty God (Gen. 17:1; 28:3; Rev. 15:3; 21:22) must limit Himself to what He can and cannot do. In other words, we create a sovereign God after our likeness and according to our own theological bias. We decide what God can and cannot do based upon our own warped concept of sovereignty.

Isaiah 1:18 portrays man as having a choice:

“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

Revelation 22:17 adds:

“And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”

John 3:36

“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.”

John 5:40

“And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.”

Acts 7:51

“Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers *did*, so *do* ye.”

I'll let the above verses speak for themselves. If you read them for what they say, which is always a good habit, then they clearly teach that man can respond to God's initiative and movement upon his soul (Acts 16:14).

In God's design, human responsibility is clearly not eliminated by God's sovereign control over His creation. God's sovereignty over all things does not require that mankind be without the ability to make choices (John 3:15; Rom. 4:5). Rather, God's sovereignty ensures that the outcome of mankind's decisions conforms to His will in the end. Mankind possesses a free will to choose, nevertheless God's will sets

the destination for our path (2 Tim. 1:9; Pet. 3:9), so that in the end we remain accountable for the path we choose.

Regardless of which path a person chooses (salvation or hell, obedience or disobedience), the Lord's will concerning all things will be done in the end.

Isaiah 46:11

"Calling a ravenous bird from the east, the man that executeth my counsel from a far country: yea, I have spoken *it*, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed *it*, I will also do it."

Obviously, there is a degree of mystery involved in reconciling the two principles of the sovereignty of God and free will of man in Scripture (Acts 13:48; Eph. 1:4). We wonder how God's will may be assured regardless of whether I choose right or wrong, Heaven or Hell? It's clear that in the omniscience and omnipotence of God, our choices and decisions remain our own and yet serve to accomplish God's ultimate will in the end. When a church member asked Charles Spurgeon (a Calvinist) how he reconciled divine sovereignty and human choice, he replied, "I never try to reconcile friends."

Spurgeon, commenting on the subject of God's sovereignty and human freedom, stated: "Brethren, be willing to see both sides of the shield of truth. Rise above the babyhood which cannot believe two doctrines until it sees the connecting link. Have you not two eyes, man? Must you needs put one of them out in order to see clearly?"



To reiterate, God is sovereign (the strong muscle man fully in control over all things) *but His limitless ability and absolute authority does not mean He can never limit His power for this would become a contradiction of unlimited power.* God can do whatever He wants to do with whomsoever He wants to do it, and in whatever way He chooses to do it. We should not lock God into a Calvinistic mold and limit the way He chooses to display His divine sovereignty.

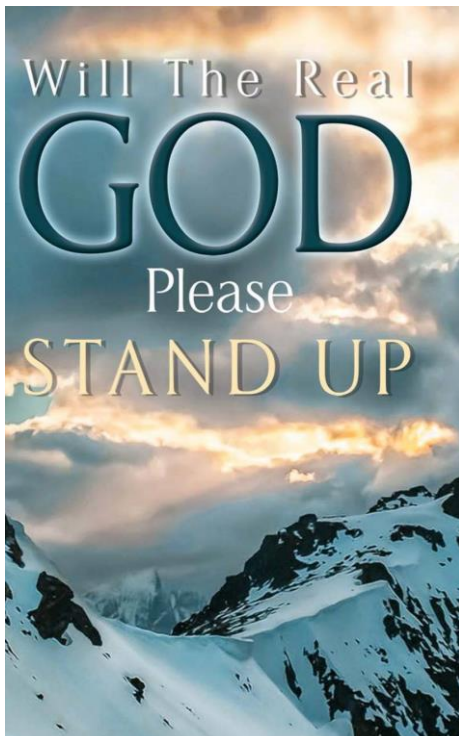
Jonah 3:10

"And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did *it* not."

God could have just destroyed all the Ninevites in exercising His sovereign power and might against them, but He chose to limit this power by allowing the people to repent. Abraham knew God was sovereign, but He still bargained with God to bring about the deliverance of his family (Gen. 18:23-32).

Twice the Bible says that God repented for something He had done in the past (Genesis 6:6-7 and 1 Samuel 15:11), and at least eleven times it says He repented or would repent of something He was about to do in the future (Exodus 32:12-14; 2 Samuel 24:16; 1 Chronicles 21:15; Psalm 106:45; Jeremiah 4:28; 18:8; 26:3, 13, 19; 42:10; Joel 2:13-14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9-10; 4:2).

Of course, we should not view the repentance of God in a way that would put Him in the same limited category of a man. God's repentance is not like man's. God is not taken off guard by unexpected turns of events like we are. He knows all the future (Isaiah 42:9). The repentance of God is His expression of a different attitude about something occurring in the past or future - not because the events have caught Him off guard. However, we discover that at a specific given point in time, in accordance with His own purpose, He can change His mind in relation to certain events that have occurred or will occur based upon man's choices. This means that human responsibility often brings about God's sovereign plans and purposes in the world (Acts 2:23; Rev. 22:17; 2 Pet. 3:9; Josh. 24:15).



To state is succinctly, God's unlimited sovereign power and authority does not mean He cannot exercise His power in a way that includes man's free will in relation to salvation (John 3:16) and sanctification (Rom. 6:12-13). God's power is certainly involved in man's choices (John 1:13) but neither does it override man's choices (John 1:12). God's power is necessary to bring about salvation and transformation (Phil. 2:13) but neither does His power bypass man's personal volition or choice (1 John 5:10). Let God be God!

Will the real sovereign God please stand up! We must allow God to implement His sovereign plans and ways as He chooses instead of following the

philosophy of hyper Calvinism (Col.2:8) which concludes that man cannot volitionally respond in faith to God's wooing and conviction and that double predestination to Heaven or Hell is God's ultimate plan for all human destinies.

God sovereignty does not cause Him to bypass or override man's will. We should not limit God's sovereignty (total authority and power) by imposing our own ideas about the sovereignty of God on Him and His plan to save sinners by declaring that man cannot respond favorably to God's inner conviction, enlightenment, and offer of salvation (Eph. 1:18). Man's spiritual death or deadness (Eph. 2:1) is not the same as physical death, as the Calvinist illogically assumes, since man is a living, breathing, rational being (Isa. 1:18).

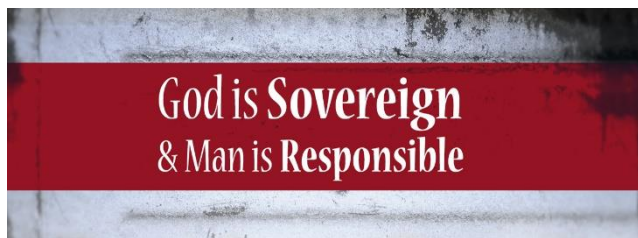
Jesus taught in John 5:25:

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead (*spiritually dead*) shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live" (*experience regeneration*).

Yes, dead men can hear! Most assuredly! The hour is right now when spiritually dead people can hear and respond to God's initiative without compromising or undermining God's sovereignty one iota. So to conclude that God cannot be God (the great superpower of the universe) unless He bypasses a person's will and volition and places elective faith in an individual, essentially believing for him, then God's sovereignty is compromised. Of course, all of this is philosophical – not Biblical. God is always sovereign and in charge despite the arguments of Calvinism.

The principle behind Isaiah 55:8-9 should be taken to heart:

"For my thoughts *are* not your thoughts, neither *are* your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."



The approach of Calvinism that says God can never place limits on His power actually limits God's sovereignty - His power, strength, authority, will, and purpose. God can express His muscle anyway He wants and to say

that He cannot is to limit His ability, power, and authority to do as He pleases for He is the Almighty and unchangeable God.