

"Is There Injustice on God's Part?"

Roger Olson a theology professor at Baylor University, wrote this on his blog, he says the idea:

"that God has decreed that he will save some particular sinners unconditionally (viz., without regard to anything he sees in them) and that he will not save other particular sinners and that this is based on God's design and foreordination including the fall of humanity into sin... leads to a distorted view of God as unlike Jesus and as morally monstrous."¹

You can probably guess the question right? Several people asked this question, and they each phrased it slightly differently, but at the bottom the question is this: How can it be that God is completely sovereign—particularly over those who will or will not come to salvation—and at the same time he holds humans responsible for their moral choices? How can it be that way? How is that fair?

It's clear how Olson feels about this question, and maybe you resonate with his description a little bit, maybe because you don't you haven't really seen or you're confused about what the Bible teaches, or maybe because you are bringing assumptions to the Bible that the Bible itself doesn't affirm.

Here at CCC we do stand in the Reformed Tradition, meaning we believe in (amongst other things) the doctrine of unconditional election, and the compatibility of God's sovereignty and human agency. To put it another way, salvation is "grace all the way down." So, I want to help you with this, because here's the deal, it doesn't matter, at the end of day, what Olson feels about this Doctrine, it doesn't matter what you or I feel about it, and ultimately it doesn't matter if we can understand it in just the way we want. What matters is if it can be found in the Scriptures. It matters what God says in His Word about His sovereignty and our responsibility. So, here's what we're going to do tonight

I. I will show that the Bible teaches God's utter sovereignty and total human responsibility, and sees them as compatible.

II. Then I will answer the question "How can both be true"

III. Then, I will show why the answer to #1 and #2 is good news!

First,

I. the Bible teaches God's utter sovereignty and total human responsibility, and sees them as compatible.

Before we come to our main passage in Romans 9, I want to show you several others passages that uphold not only God's sovereignty or human responsibility, but ***both of those truths*** in the very same passage of Scripture. So turn with me, or follow along on the screen. First,

Genesis 50:15-20

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." ¹⁶ So they sent a

¹ Roger E. Olson, "Calvinist Attempts to Rescue God's Character Considered and Refuted," at

message to Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died: ¹⁷ ‘Say to Joseph, “Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.” And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.” ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 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.

Notice that the brothers (v. 15), Jacob (v. 17) and Joseph (v. 20) identify what the brothers did as evil. No one doubts that Joseph’s brothers did evil against him, but somehow God was sovereign over it, and working through it—without doing evil himself. Joseph’s brothers are responsible, and God is sovereign.

Isa. 10:5-7, 12

Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger;
the staff in their hands is my fury!
⁶ Against a godless nation I send him,
and against the people of my wrath I command him,
to take spoil and seize plunder,
and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.
⁷ **But he does not so intend,
and his heart does not so think;
but it is in his heart to destroy,
and to cut off nations not a few;**

¹² **When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes.**

Did you catch that? God stirred up Assyria to do what he wanted them to do, judge the Northern Kingdom Israel, but (v. 7) that “he [Assyria] does not so intend.” God essentially gives Assyria the idea to come and “take spoil,” “plunder,” and “tread down.” Then when God is done judging Israel with his rod Assyria, he will judge Assyria because they are arrogant and boastful over having destroyed Israel. God is sovereign, and Assyria, particularly the king of Assyria, is responsible

Matt. 11:25-30

²⁵ At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, **and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.** ²⁸ **Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.** ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Jesus thanks God that not everyone understands (if children and the foolish understand it glorifies God, because wise would say “of course I understand—look how smart I am), saying this is according to God’s “gracious will.” Then he says “no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone who the

Son chooses to reveal him.” Jesus **chooses** to reveal (or not). Then he says “Come to me, all who labor.” God reveals, Jesus chooses, but he **offers** to anyone who will come. If you come he will never turn you away, and you will have come because he chose to reveal the Father to you.

John 6:44-47

⁴⁴ **No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.** And I will raise him up on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— ⁴⁶ not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, **whoever believes has eternal life.**

Jesus says “no one” can come unless they are drawn to Jesus by the Father. The context is that there are Jews there who are grumbling and rejecting Jesus’s teaching about being “bread of life” and God incarnate—in other words he’s looking right at them and saying “the Father’s not drawing you, that’s why you don’t believe in me.”

And then just a few sentences later he says “**whoever** believes has eternal life.” Anyone who wants eternal life, anyone who wants to be saved, all they have to do is believe in Jesus. All you have to do is believe in Jesus and God will forgive your sins because Jesus died in your place, and if you do, ultimately, that will be because God is drawing you to Jesus. God is sovereign, and you are called to believe.

Acts 2:22-24

²² “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—²³ this Jesus, **delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.** ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

The first sermon on this side of Pentecost, and Peter says Jesus was crucified according to God’s definite plan and foreknowledge. He wanted it to happen. But when he was crucified but he wasn’t crucified by God, but by the “hands of lawless men.” They were lawless, in part, because they crucified the Son of God. The most heinous act in history, the murder of the only blameless human, who by the way is also the incarnate Creator of the universe, and it happened according to God’s “**definite**” plan. God is sovereign, man is responsible.

If we come back to our main text then, do we not see the same principle at work that God is sovereign and humans are responsible?

Starting in Romans 9:11-12

¹¹ **though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—** ¹² she was told, “The older will serve the younger.”¹³ As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Nothing Jacob or Esau is the reason that God chooses Jacob over Esau. And you’re probably thinking, “Doesn’t that make God unjust?” And that’s exactly the reaction Paul anticipates—this is one of the ways we know we are interpreting this text rightly, because when we read it a part of us gets offended exactly where Paul expects, and we ask exactly the questions Paul expects his reader to ask. He knows what you’re going to say, v. 14:

¹⁴ What shall we say then? ***Is there injustice on God's part?*** By no means!

How can Paul answer so emphatically “By no means!”

Now if ever there were a place to write “***God chooses based on foreseen faith***” this would be the place right? It would immediately solve the problem that humans have with the idea that God chooses who he will save unconditionally. It would immediately solve the dilemma of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. And that ***isn’t*** Paul’s reason. By no means!

His reasoning is v. 15:

¹⁵ For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”

Now, think about this. How is ***that*** a reason why God is not unjust? Doesn’t it just sound like Paul has restated the problem. We don’t enough time to talk through all the details of what Paul is drawing on here. But, this quotation comes from Exodus 33:19.

Remember what happened, in Exodus 32, Israel having come out of Egypt and come to the mountain of the Lord to enter into a covenant with Him, while Moses is up receiving the Law, Israel builds a golden calf and participates in this orgiastic idolatry. God says he’s done with them, but Moses pleads with God, and when God agrees not to abandon Israel, Moses asks that God would show Moses his glory.

¹⁹ And God said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

The Lord answers Moses’s request to see his glory with his “***goodness***” and his “***name***.” Why? Because in the Bible ***God’s name, and character, and glory are inseparable***. God’s glory *is* his name, his character, his goodness.

In other words, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion” is what it means for God to be God. Which means he is not unjust in unconditionally electing, because he is acting in accordance with who he is. If he ***didn’t*** save in this way he would be acting out of accordance with his goodness and his character—that would be unjust. And if he didn’t save in this way, no one would be saved!

So, God is absolutely sovereign over salvation, he chooses the elect before the foundation of the world, but then look at what Paul says in

Romans 9:30-32

³⁰ What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹ but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. ³² Why? **Because they did not pursue it by faith**, but as if it were based on works.

All that stuff about God’s sovereignty in unconditional election, and then when he actually answers the question “well, why isn’t Israel believing in the Messiah” what does he say? Because ***they*** didn’t pursue it by faith.

It is clear then that:

I. The Bible teaches God's utter sovereignty and total human responsibility, and sees them as compatible.

But

II. "How can they both be true?"

It is understandable that you would ask that question, so here's my answer: ***They just are, and you have to be ok with that.*** The Bible affirms God's sovereignty and human responsibility as being compatible, and you have to be ok with that. That's not a cop-out, and it isn't a slight at anyone who struggles with it, it is just reality. It is good to ask questions, and good to search the Scriptures and to understand what God **has** revealed, but look at the end of the day, where you're going to end up is here:

1. God is completely sovereign
2. Humans are responsible for their choices, including the choice to believe in Jesus or not.

A. Any attempt to explain how they can both be true ultimately ends up denying one or the other. Some examples:

1. Determinism/Hyper Calvinism – Swinging too far to the side of God's sovereignty denies responsibility and leads to error. Hyper-Calvinism goes so far as to say "don't preach the Gospel unless you know someone is elect" because if someone is elect, God will surely bring them to faith (whatever we do or don't do). That diminishes responsibility.
2. Election based on foreknowledge – Doug Wilson calls this "election in a cheap tux." Here's why, if the problem with unconditional election is that only certain people will be saved, foreknowledge doesn't solve the problem. If God knows all things perfectly, and he knew who would believe in him before he created, then when he did create the world, only those who's faith he had foreseen would actually believe. So, you end up in the same place (only some certain people believe), but you've gotten there by denying something the Bible teaches, namely, God's sovereignty.

B. Who are you, O man?

What does Paul say (note again the question he anticipates is the same one in your mind right now):

Romans 9:19-23

¹⁹ You will say to me then, "**Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?**" ²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? ²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory

“Who are you, O Man, to answer back to God.” Now Paul isn’t just saying “shut up and don’t ask questions” he’s responding to a particularly arrogant form of question that says to God “you can’t do it that way!” Paul’s responding to those who would accuse God.

And here’s the argument of this paragraph: God is the maker of all things, he can do what he wants with all things, and he can be trusted to magnify his glory—and when God magnifies his glory it is good for his creation.

John Piper tells the story of when he was at Fuller Seminary and he was first exposed to this explanation of Romans 9, and he would argue with his professor, not arguing as a son to a father, but pointing his finger at him in derision. Once he took his pen, and kind of wagged it in front of his professor and dropped it on the ground saying “I DID THAT! God didn’t make me I DID IT!” This is the type of reaction to which Paul says “Who are you, O man...”

If you believe the Bible, at some point you’ve got to give up the “how can they both be true” question. I’m not just punting, I’m saying go search, ask questions, think, but the Bible is pretty clear:

“Who are you, O man, to answer back to God.”

God has made it abundantly clear in his Word that he is sovereign and you and I have responsibility.

**II. The answer then, to the question “How can both be true” is,
“They are, and you have to be ok with that.”**

Finally,

III. Why is this good news?

Three reasons it is good news:

A. No one is beyond saving.

If you’re sitting out there thinking, “If God chose before the foundation of the world, well I guess he didn’t chose me. Look at at the wrong I’ve done.” God doesn’t base his love on what you have or haven’t done: Jacob was a liar, Paul was a persecutor of the church, encouraging the murder of Christians. It is un-conditional. The question is will you repent and believe in Jesus?

B. Evangelism doesn’t depend finally on you, but on God. God calls us to share our faith, but it can be hard to know what to say or to have all the answer. These twin truths teach us that we should have confidence when we share the gospel, because it doesn’t depend on he who wills or trys but on God who has mercy. It is our job to be faithful, and his to make fruit.

3. A God that is beyond human ability to understand, but has loved us enough to send Christ, is truly a God worthy of worship. Think of it this way:

If you wanted to take your spouse out for a really great meal, something like once in a lifetime good, would you go to a restaurant where you know more about food and cooking than the chef does?

If you were looking to grow in your career, and really develop both your strengths and your weaknesses, would you try to find a mentor who knew nothing about your field?

If you are diagnosed with cancer, would you just do some googleing and set up your own treatment plan, or would you go to a doctor with more knowledge, wisdom, and experience than you?

You get the point. Why then, when it comes to God's sovereignty and human responsibility, do you expect to find the ultimate answer to be something that you can understand? Why, when it comes to your Savior, do you demand a Savior you can understand. Is a God whose ways you can totally understand worthy of your worship? Or is a God who is so far beyond you worthy of worship?

The Bible is clear both sovereignty and responsibility are true, and it is gloriously good news because it means this God who is so far beyond our ability to comprehend—THIS GOD though far beyond us, sent his own Son to die in our place, that we might be reconciled to God.

When you let go of the need to be smart enough to understand, you end up echoing the worship of Paul at the end of Romans 11:

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?"

³⁵ "Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?"

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.
Amen.