

# As It Has Been Determined

Luke 22:21-23 | November 1, 2020 | Bryce Beale

There are many ways to explain away your responsibility before God. He speaks by his word to you and dictates how you ought to live—and for the most part, he is very clear and simple in his speech.

He demands, for example, that you should humble yourself, admit your own errors against heaven, and give yourself over wholly to Christ, the Son of God. God requires that you cling to Christ as your raft at sea, and not to the debris of your own goodness.

That is simple enough.

But then the serpent's hiss echoes in our ears and we are in the garden again, inventing excuses for why we should disregard the command and dig our teeth into the skin of that forbidden fruit. Even those of us not skilled in the use of our minds become instant scholars, researching any way, any verse, any out available for the command before us.

We think, "Well, certainly it is the death of Christ alone that can wash away my sins. And faith in that death is, no doubt, all that God requires of me. But the work I have put into my Christianity, it cannot count for nothing. All the Sunday mornings I have surrendered to go to church, all the money I have given to good causes, all the forbidden pleasures I have resisted. It is much more than most can say of their own efforts."

Yet right there in that thought, reasonable as it might appear, I have tried to slip out of the grip of God's command. He commands, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."<sup>1</sup> It is a simple thing. It requires that I abandon any trust in myself, as if I could save myself from the judgment of God, and that I instead cast myself completely at the foot of Christ's cross. I must trust him, not me.

But that is a hard doctrine, because it leaves me with nothing. I can make no demands on God; if I have not paid into the pot of my deliverance, I have no leverage with him. Everything will depend on his grace and be completely outside of my sway.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 16:31 (ESV).

And so I set aside this simple obligation of faith, and complicate the matter. “Has God really said?” I say.

The divine obligation still sits upon my head. “Believe, believe! Turn from your self-trust, and trust in Christ! There is salvation in no one else; no other name under heaven exists by which we may be saved.” I am responsible for my response to that simple call of the gospel.

But by nuance and clever avenues of thought, I try to sneak my way away from my responsibility. I continue to throw the coins of my good behavior into the offering plate, trusting at least a little in them.

You and I may like Adam shirk the responsibility upon us and point to Eve, “the woman you gave me”; we may like Eve shirk our responsibility and point to the snake. We may be as clever as that snake in our worming out of the grip of God’s word.

Yet God’s word stands. And therefore, no matter what we think, our responsibility before that word is solid and secure. You and I who believe in the full sovereignty of God over all the affairs of mankind—how could we believe in anything else and still adhere to the plain assertions of Scripture?—you and I are especially vulnerable to the devil’s deceit in the matter of our responsibility.

And so for us God provides a text like the one we come upon today in Luke. Jesus at the Last Supper turns his words from pleasant to stark. And he very plainly affirms the sovereignty of God over man, but then just as plainly affirms the responsibility of man before God. The one does not negate the other, nor is it any excuse we can use to escape the commands of the Creator.

Let’s see this in the text.

### **LUKE 22:21-23**

We have already spoken of Judas and his diabolical plot, at the start of this chapter, to betray Jesus over to the religious leaders, that they might have that innocent man killed. I will not repeat all we said at that point. And we will see Judas again in the very act of betrayal, so I will not yet cover the details of that fateful event.

But what our present text forces upon our attention is not merely Judas, but a fundamental reality that neither you nor I could ever

understand. It is the relationship between God's sovereignty and our responsibility.

These two facts—that God is fully sovereign, and that we are fully responsible for our decisions—are everywhere asserted throughout the Bible. You cannot give one or the other up without losing some part of the Scriptures. Yet, as with the Trinity, how these two pieces fit together is too hard, too deep, too profound for us to comprehend. God can comprehend it, but we cannot.

So, if we cannot see how the pieces fit together, why are we told about the pieces at all? And the answer is, so that we do not use either one to negate the other. You are told that God is entirely in control of all that comes to pass. This is true and is very good. But being who we are in this world, we will be tempted to use God's sovereignty as an excuse to disobey his clear commands. We may say something like, "I know I am commanded to believe in Christ, but I cannot do that unless God sovereignly makes me. So, it is not my responsibility, but God's."

We would make that excuse, except that God also gives us the other piece of truth: we are fully responsible for every decision we make. That is not somehow less true than God's sovereignty—no, both are true. You are called to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be held responsible for whether you do or do not. You cannot appeal to any teaching of the Scriptures as an excuse; the Scriptures themselves are demanding this of you.

It is this, among other reasons, that makes us very grateful for a passage like the one before us. Because here Jesus asserts in no uncertain terms both pieces of the mysterious puzzle: first, God's sovereignty, which is absolute; and secondly, Judas' responsibility, which is not negated by the fact that God is in control.

We therefore, since this is the grass our shepherd has set before us, will graze in two stages. We will consider first the sin of Judas, and then we will ask how, if God is sovereign, Judas can be held responsible for that sin.

### Judas is responsible

So let us begin with Judas' sin.

"But behold," begins our text. Jesus starts here with a contrast and calls for emphasis on what he is about to say, because it is a

stark and unexpected statement: “the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table.”

The focus here is on the hand of Judas, because it is with that hand that Judas will “hand over” Jesus to those who hate him. That word “betrays” is literally “hand over.” In fact, that is where we get the words “betray” and “traitor” in English—from the Latin form of the very word in our text, *tradere*, to hand over.

In this single evil act of Judas, this “handing over,” two vices are combined—and they are the two vices most closely associated with Satan in the Scriptures. This makes sense, since Luke told us earlier in this chapter, in verse 3, that “Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot.”<sup>2</sup> And he would enter him again by the supper’s end, when he goes out.<sup>3</sup> Judas is of the devil, and he does the desires of the devil, the two main vices of that fiend.

The first is deceit. The devil, said Jesus, “is a liar and the father of lies.”<sup>4</sup> And Judas was like his father in this.

Notice that the hand which betrays Jesus is at the table with him. The fact that Jesus says “betrays” instead of “will betray” may be because Judas is already in the process of turning over his Master. His heart is full of treason even before it is in his hand. He has already plotted with Jerusalem’s leaders. And therefore, in order to successfully betray Jesus, Judas keeps up a false appearance. He is at the table, which in that culture meant fellowship, closeness, trust much more than it does in ours. He goes on tricking everyone around him, lying to them, not being fully honest about what is in his heart.

Psalm 55 describes him:

His speech was smooth as butter,  
yet war was in his heart;  
his words were softer than oil,  
yet they were drawn swords.<sup>5</sup>

And Judas succeeded in his deceit in eleven out of twelve cases. For when Jesus, the one case in which he failed, points out that one of the apostles will betray him, see what the others do in

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 22:3.

<sup>3</sup> John 13:27.

<sup>4</sup> John 8:44.

<sup>5</sup> V. 21.

verse 23: “And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this.”

The only other disciple who seems to figure it out is the apostle John, for in his gospel he explains that at this point Peter asked him to discover from the Lord who would betray him; and the Lord indicated the person to John by dipping bread in a dish and handing it to Judas.<sup>6</sup>

Judas is living a lie.

Many attempts have been made to explain why Judas betrayed Jesus. And as we said previously, those attempts are only guesses—the one real reason we know is greed, that Judas wanted his thirty pieces of silver for the act.

Yet I would not at all be surprised if Judas had imagined up nobler purposes for his evil deed, and in that way tricked not only the eleven but also himself. For lying to others and lying to ourselves are quite closely connected. The word says, “Do not bear false witness,”—that is, lie—and if we hear that word but do not do it then we, according to James, are “hearers only, deceiving [our]selves.”<sup>7</sup>

You yourself may know this experience of deceit. A husband here may treat his wife quite terribly, in a way he would not want anyone to see. Yet when he treats her so, he has his many reasons which put his mind at ease. “Well, I’m not as bad as some husbands.” “I may vent every now and then, but it’s only because she gives me something to vent about.” “She’s no saint herself.” “I only do it because my father did.”

Then he comes to church on Sunday and smiles and treats his wife with the utmost grace and delicacy. She sees right through the ruse, but no one else may. So the man has lied to everyone else, and has tricked even himself.

You choose your sin of choice, and you will find the same dynamic at work. Sin is like those plants called sciophytes, which grow best in the shade; sin loves darkness. As Paul says, “those who get drunk, are drunk at night.”<sup>8</sup> And so those who drink in sin, do it under the cover of deception, just like Judas here.

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<sup>6</sup> John 13:24-26.

<sup>7</sup> James 1:22.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Thes. 5:7.

But deceit is only one of the devil's two great vices, for Jesus also said, "He was a murderer from the beginning." And so in Judas we find not only deceit, but murder.

That is the nature of his betrayal—it is a deceit leading to murder.

Murder is the far opposite of love. True love as Christ displayed it involves a sacrifice of the self for the good of another. "Greater love," said Jesus, "has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."<sup>9</sup> Then the opposite must be, "Greater hate has no one than this, that someone lay down his friends' lives for his own." That is murder.

Any time we set aside the interests of others in order to serve our own, in our common acts of selfishness, we are committing murder in miniature. Every act of selfishness wants to become murder, though in God's grace it does not always succeed. But that is the heart that lies beneath murder: I will be better benefited with you out of the way, and so I will take you out of the way.

Judas could have thirty pieces of silver to spend as he pleased, if he complied in the murder of this innocent man. Yes, that would mean agony and anguish for that man, that would mean a violation of justice for him—things Judas would never desire for himself. But, the outcome would be thirty pieces of silver to spend on his pleasures.

This betrayal of Judas then we might call a murder cloaked in deceit—it is the combination of the devil's chief vices.

But this moves us to an important question: Judas act is evil, but is he responsible for it?

### Judas is responsible

Of course we would say he is, but I must ask the question because of what Jesus plainly asserts in verse 22: "For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined."

What can this mean? Exactly what it says. Jesus goes—to his death—as it has been determined. The manner was decided beforehand. And "has been determined" is what we call a divine passive—God is the one who determined it.

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<sup>9</sup> John 15:13.

And lest you think we are only misinterpreting this one vague statement of Jesus, let me show you how the rest of the Bible speaks of God's control over this event.

Peter at Pentecost cried out, "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan [literally "determined plan," using the same word as in our text] and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."<sup>10</sup> Jesus was betrayed according to God's predetermined plan.

Shortly afterward the early church prayed this: "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."<sup>11</sup>

And since God had told his people through the prophets beforehand what he meant to do, he further committed himself to doing it. It could not be otherwise. This is what Jesus meant when he was betrayed by Judas in the garden and, though aware he could summon angels to his rescue, added, "But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?"<sup>12</sup>

In fact, our very passage in the parallels, Matthew and Mark, reads like this: "The Son of Man goes as it is written of him."<sup>13</sup>

And what was written about him? This, for example, from Psalm 41:9: "Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me."

The betrayal of Jesus was prearranged in some manner by God. It was, we say in theological terms, decreed by God from eternity past. God did not and does not approve of it—it was murderous deceit! God does not tempt any to evil; God does not delight in evil. Yet somehow, it is clear from all these texts, God had decreed these events in order to bring about good.

As Paul summarizes the doctrine in Ephesians 1: God "works all things according to the counsel of his will."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Acts 2:23.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 4:27-28.

<sup>12</sup> Matt. 26:54.

<sup>13</sup> Matt. 26:24; Mark 14:21.

<sup>14</sup> V. 11.

And so Jesus here can say, “For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined.”

And we then must ask, “If it has been determined, how can Judas be held responsible for it?” That is the logic that naturally arises in our minds.

Let me begin an answer in the simplest way possible: first, Judas is responsible simply because that is what Scripture says. Even our Scripture here says it. Notice what immediately follows the statement of God’s sovereignty in verse 22: “For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe!” “Woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!”

Matthew and Mark add that it would have been better for that man never to have been born.<sup>15</sup>

If your understanding of God’s sovereignty cancels out human responsibility—if it gets Judas off the hook, or you off the hook—then you will need to start tearing quite a few pages out of your Bible. Because in this book it is everywhere assumed that you and I and Judas and every rational being are responsible for the actions we choose to take. We choose to take them; we must give an account for them.

This is why we are what is called “compatibilists”—we believe that God can be completely sovereign *and* humans can be fully responsible for their decisions. We don’t pretend to understand how those two facts can be facts side by side, any more than we pretend to understand how Jesus can be fully God and fully man, or how the three persons of the Godhead can all be one God and yet be three persons.

But we believe God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility are compatible because we cannot biblically deny either one.

I cannot scrub from my Bible these words: “the Son of Man goes as it has been determined.” So, I accept that God determined it, that he decreed all that comes to pass. But neither can I erase these words which follow: “but woe to that man!” I must accept and believe that we are responsible for our decisions.

When Paul in Romans 9 is dealing with the difficulty of holding these two facts together, he answers that difficulty like this:

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<sup>15</sup> Mark 14:21; Matt. 26:24.

You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” 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?”<sup>21</sup> 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? 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, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory.<sup>16</sup>

One of the greatest theologians America has produced, the first president of Yale, Jonathan Edwards, at first hated this doctrine. He was not at all pleased that God was fully in control of all that came to pass. He wrote,

From childhood up, my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God’s sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me. But I remember the time very well, when I seemed to be convinced, and fully satisfied, as to this sovereignty of God, and his justice in thus eternally disposing of men, according to his sovereign pleasure.... God’s absolute sovereignty and justice, with respect to salvation and damnation, is what my mind seems to rest assured of, as much as of any thing that I see with my eyes, at least it is so at times. The doctrine has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

If this doctrine of Scripture, of God’s absolute sovereignty, is difficult for you, I offer one final reason for you to embrace it. Not only is it thoroughly biblical, but it is also the best possible doctrine for us.

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<sup>16</sup> Vv. 19-23.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in John Piper, “The Absolute Sovereignty of God: What Is Romans Nine About?” *DesiringGod.org* (Nov. 3, 2002).

You may be frustrated that you cannot put the pieces together, but let me ask: which of the pieces, if you could choose, would you discard?

On the one hand, would you like to be rid of God's absolute sovereignty? Then there would be no difficulty at all in understanding how we are responsible, since we alone without any heavenly interference make our decisions. But then you would find yourself in a universe of utter chaos. You would lose every ounce of your security and comfort in this universe of terrors.

If God is not sovereign over all that comes to pass, then you have no guarantee that all that comes to pass will work together for your good. You may experience much wasted suffering, accidents that God did not intend but which you must endure, never certain that your suffering will conclude in happiness. If God does not bear full control of your heart and will, who is to say that even if you should make it to paradise, you would not accidentally slip out of God's weak grip? You might fall like the devil. You would have no true security.

On the other hand, we could get rid of the mental conundrum by discarding human responsibility. Then the logic would be simple: God makes all the decisions and we are but robots, so he is responsible and we are not. That is simple logic, but it makes for a terrible world. Then we have no freedom at all. Nothing is meaningful; we are only playing parts determined for us, we are slaves to a strict fatalism. Our choices mean nothing at all.

Would you prefer that sort of a world?

No! If we could have it our way, we would have God upon the throne of his absolute sovereignty as our comfort in times of trial, and we would have for ourselves a sort of freedom beneath his greater freedom, in which our decisions are meaningful and we are not mere robots.

Well, you and I cannot imagine how we could have our cake and eat it too, how we could have both of these glorious truths be true—yet God can imagine it, and so it is.

When we encounter a passage like the one before us in Luke, where "it has been determined," may God give us the grace to say with genuine joy, "Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God."