

Free Will and the Sovereignty of God

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Part 1, The Question

How can man have free will, yet our omnipotent God is sovereign and completely in charge? The two seem to conflict and cannot coexist, yet we are told that both are true, and they do indeed coexist. This study attempts to understand the nature of mankind's free will and how it can be reconciled with God's sovereignty.

What Is Free Will?

Wikipedia defines free will simply as the capacity or ability to choose between different possible courses of action. In our study, free will is being considered in the context of man's relationship with God. As a creation of God, man is granted the ability to choose a path or action other than the one God desires for us to choose. The Bible is full of examples of God's creatures, often men and women of faith, choosing to disobey God and take paths that are in total opposition to His desires for us. There are also many examples of His creatures choosing to trust in His leading and obey Him. Undeniably, man was granted the ability to choose between different possible courses of action even when that course of action may be in opposition to God's desires. Since God created us, we are compelled to believe that He gave us this free will and for a reason.

God Is Sovereign

God is sovereign. That is, God is supreme volition, and there is no higher volition in the universe. As sovereign, He is the supreme being of the universe. Many passages establish the sovereignty of God. The four below are good examples.

Deuteronomy 4:39 know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.

1 Chronicles 29:11 Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours.

2 Chronicles 20:6 ... You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you.

Isaiah 46:9 ... I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, ¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.'

That last one is as clear a statement of intent as ever was. God is the Congress, Supreme Court, and President, all in one being. He will accomplish all He has set out to do, and He will do it despite the fact he must use "broken vessels."

God is Righteous

And "broken vessels" we are. Since the Garden, man is a fallen race with a sin nature and a propensity to sin, living in a fallen world. Isaiah says, on our best day, "...all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment" (Isaiah 64:6). "Polluted garment" is politely translated that way here in the ESV but refers to menstrual rags, which is how the KJV translates it. Paul in Romans makes the same charge.

Romans 3:23 ... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

By contrast, God's righteousness is far beyond our own.

Psalms 71:19 Your righteousness, O God, reaches the high heavens ... O God, who is like you?"

God is righteous and sovereign over all but not unapproachable. In fact, He wants us to approach Him. Despite the fact that we are a fallen race, He desires fellowship with His creation. He has a personal interest in you and me, a personal interest and desire for fellowship with us to the point that He found a way to have fellowship with His very unrighteous creation without

compromising His own righteousness. He did this by sending Jesus Christ as our mediator to be a propitiation for our sins.

2 Corinthians 5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That we might become the righteousness of God... Based on our faith in what Christ did on the Cross, God credits the righteousness of Christ to our account in Heaven. Paul speaks of this in Philippians:

Philippians 3:9 ... not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

God is perfect righteousness (+R), and He found a way to have fellowship with His less-than-righteous (-R) creation. Furthermore, He gave His -R creation the freedom of choice to choose a path other than one desired by a supremely sovereign being.

Why Free Will?

Considering that human free will decisions can often result in actions that oppose God's desires, the next question might be *why* He gave man free will.

Colossians 1:16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

Man's ultimate purpose is to glorify God. We fulfill this purpose by faith in Christ, living our lives in obedience, faithful service to Him, and loving Him. We have free will to choose to do that or not.

Consider the possibilities: If we had been created without free will, any "worship" of God or "faithful service" would have to be coerced by God, and man would be nothing more than an automaton, a robot that simply does God's bidding. Any "love" for God would be in name only and completely meaningless, having no value to God. On the other hand, a creature that

seeks fellowship and loves God of his own free will demonstrates true obedience and love. That kind of obedience and love is truly meaningful to God.

Additionally, mankind was given free will to glorify God by being a testimony against Satan in the Angelic Conflict. Satan rebelled against God and His authority, and mankind was subsequently created to be Satan's appeal trial to demonstrate how wrong Satan was and still is. But that is a subject for another study. (The details can be found in my series on *Spiritual Warfare* at <https://www.thbbf.org/life-resources>.)

We conclude that God felt it necessary to give mankind free will despite knowing it would be abused and lead to evil. In harmony with His sovereign decree that man be allowed freedom of choice, God will never use His absolute will to coerce the volition He gave mankind. God honors your decisions, whether they are for or against Him. He will, however, attempt to encourage and guide those who are His. We will see how He does this later in this study.

How does it work?

Back to our original question: How can man have free will, yet our omnipotent God is sovereign and completely in charge?

Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8 speaks to this and verse 28 begins with the phrase "And we know...." The Greek word *oida* for "know" comes to us via the Latin as our English word "video," however, in this application, *oida* does not imply perception through visual stimuli. It should be viewed here as a statement that what we know is a well-known fact and common knowledge among believers. The statement "for those who love God" tells us that those who "know" are born-again believers.

What do we know? For believers in Christ, "all things work together for good." What happens to these "all things?" They "work together," and the Greek word for this is *sunergeo*, which translates here as "work together." This is where we get our English word "synergy." The word implies a pulling

together of seemingly unrelated, discordant, even conflicting, and negative things, events, and actions.

What gets synergized? “All things.” The Greek word for this is *pas*, which means everyone or everything. Nothing is left out. The “all things” are everything that happens in our lives, the good and the bad, and in the context of our study, especially the bad things. They are the issues, tests, trials, tribulations, and even blessings in our lives.

God's providential synergistic activity regarding these "all things" has a purpose, and that is to produce good. The Greek word is *agathos*, and it refers to a good that has value superior to the sum of its parts. What happens to these synergized “all things”? Regardless of their constitution, good or bad, God promises that those who love Him will have these “all things” converted to *agathos*.

Who gets this benefit? “Those called according to God's purpose who love Him.” Loving God is defined as obedience to Him elsewhere in Scripture. “Called according to God's purpose” simply means that God has a plan for your life, and He will do all He can to see that you fulfill His plan for your life. But you still have that free will to choose to follow God’s plan or go your own way.

Romans 8:28 is a promise we all need to claim at some point in our lives. Things can be pretty scary, but I thank God for Romans 8:28. It is my life preserver in this sea of turmoil we call life. No matter what, I know that God will take all the circumstances in my life, my good decisions and bad decisions, and synergize them into something that ultimately benefits me. This is not a license to do whatever you want, and God will fix it. There will be consequences for our actions, a price to pay, and it could be painful, very painful.

This is wonderful and helpful to us, but my focus is not on verse 28, at least not on the “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God” part. My focus will be on the verses that follow. For those who love God, there is an order of events that God has set out in verses 29 and 30.

Romans 8:29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

These verses reveal God's purpose for believers and what He proposes will happen. God's purpose will be realized no matter what. God foreknew us in eternity past, predestined us to be conformed to the image of His son, and then called us for His purpose. He also justified those He called and glorified those He justified. This process implies a sovereign decision on the part of God. God makes a choice and acts on that choice.

Two truths come out in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation:

1. God is sovereign.
2. Man is held accountable for his decisions and his actions.

So... God is in control, but man can make decisions that he may be held accountable for? Yep.

Ephesians 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

¹¹ 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, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

This passage is loaded with the sovereignty of God. God has chosen us, and the statement is directed to believers. When did He do this? Before the foundations of the world were even laid out. Why has He chosen us? "That we should be holy and blameless before him" (v. 4).

God's purpose is to make believers holy (sanctified or set apart) and blameless. This relates to Romans 8:29, "conformed to the image of his Son," and verse 30, "That we would be glorified"

How did God do this? He predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ. "Predestined" means to be marked out beforehand. The emphasis is on the "what" (or purpose) rather than the "who." The chosen are predestined to be adopted as sons of God in Jesus Christ. It is absolutely certain that the *chosen* will accept Christ. All of this was done "according to the good pleasure of his will" (v. 5). God made a choice according to His own sovereign will and pleasure.

Verse 6 says this choosing results in salvation (made us accepted). The underlying Greek word means to grace, to endow with special honor, or to make accepted and highly favored. Back in the hippy days, we would say, "graced out." God is not obliged to grace any of us with salvation, but He chooses to.

Verse 7 says we (the chosen) have forgiveness and are redeemed because we are such lovely people, and God can't help Himself. No, it doesn't say that! It says, "According to the richness of His grace." The source of this forgiveness and redemption has nothing to do with how deserving we are. It has everything to do with God's grace.

Verse 8 says God's grace is given to enable believers to understand His will. God gives us wisdom, *sophia*. The word means objective insight into the true nature of God's revelation. And He gives us understanding - *phronesis*, which refers to intellectual understanding or insight.

Verse 9 says God makes known to us the mystery of His will. A Mystery is something that was previously hidden but is now revealed as truth. God's will is revealed to believers, and it is done "according to his purpose."

God will set forth in Christ “a plan for the fullness of times to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (v. 10). The “fullness of times” is the end of human temporal history when God has redeemed man and earth for Himself through Christ's work on the Cross. Satan and his plan will ultimately be defeated, and God will redeem and reclaim what was lost in the Garden and is rightfully His.

God has a plan, and that plan has a purpose and objective. Before the foundations of the world were laid, God made certain sovereign decisions related to that plan. That plan resulted in His choosing certain individuals from among mankind to play an active role in meeting its objectives. Therefore, God also has a plan for our lives. It is His plan for His sovereign purposes, and it is His sovereign choice of whom He will call out.

Back to Romans

Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

We need to define and develop a few terms and concepts before we can really understand this process.

God's foreknowledge is part of His omniscience. To understand foreknowledge it helps to understand omniscience. God knows all, your innermost secrets, your past, your future, as well as what might have been if you made choices other than those you do make. This English word is derived from two Latin words: *omnis*, meaning “all,” and *sciens*, which means “knowing,” thus we have “all knowing.”

1 Samuel 2:3 ...for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.

Job 37:16 Do you know the balancings of the clouds, the wondrous works of him who is perfect in knowledge.

“Perfect” is *tamiym* and means without blemish, complete, full, or perfect. God's omniscience lacks nothing by way of perception! God's omniscience comprehends all things, things past, things present, things future, and includes the merely possible as well as the actual. It includes what did happen and will happen, *plus* all the possible alternatives to that all the way into eternity. This knowledge of the merely possible is called “middle knowledge” or knowledge of the counterfactuals. (More on this below.)

God's knowledge is not related to or limited by time. Our knowledge is based on time, and we are limited by time, but God's knowledge is superimposed over time. To God, the things of the past are as real as those of the present, and things of the future are as real as those of the past. God sees all His program of events in their unified whole. Omniscience brings everything—past, present, and future—with equal reality before the mind of God.

Divine knowledge is simultaneous as opposed to succession. In God's mind, the knowledge of one thing is not before another. One act of knowledge does not beget another. However, for man, one thing is before another, one year before another, one act of knowledge before another, one generation of man before another, one is the cause, and the other is the effect. In man's mind, there is such a succession.

God knows there will be a succession, but there is no such order in God's knowledge. He knows all these successions by one glance, without any succession of knowledge in Himself. God knew it all simultaneously in eternity past. Furthermore, He always knew it. Omniscience is not the ability to acquire knowledge but is the actual possession of knowledge.

Foreknowledge

Part of God's omniscience is His foreknowledge. Foreknowledge is restricted to the actual and excludes the merely possible. The word is *proginosko* and means to know something beforehand. It is a compound Greek word made up of *pro* and *gonosko*. *Pro* means before, in front of, or prior to, and *gonosko* means to know.

Foreknowledge is far more than just the knowledge of future events or the preknowledge of future events. Foreknowledge is that which God Himself proposes to bring to pass. As such, foreknowledge is related to foreordination in that it is part of the divine decree of God.

Foreknowledge is that which God proposes to bring to pass. Remember the word for perfect knowledge - *tamiym* without blemish, complete, full, perfect. By definition, God's foreknowledge is far more than just the knowledge of your existence and what you will do with your life. It implies an intimate knowledge of you and your every thought and action. God foreknows the actions of all moral agents. He knows what decisions you will make and what actions will result from those decisions. This does not preclude the free will of man. This divine foreknowledge, in and of itself, implies no element of necessity or determination, though it does imply certainty. Foreknowledge does not mean that something has to happen, only that it is absolutely certain that it will happen. It is what God proposes to happen, and with that comes absolute certainty.

The question of free will in the moral agent arises when it is asked whether a man has the freedom to act other than as God foreknew he would act. The answer is that the human will is indeed capable of electing a different course than that which was foreknown, but he will not do so. If he did, what he would do would be that which was foreknown.

Divine foreknowledge does not coerce. It merely knows what human choice and action will be. This does not imply that God is acting on preknown human decisions. That would be a violation of the sovereignty of God. For God to base His plan on the foibles of human depravity would be risky in the extreme. In other words, God does not merely look into the future to see what you will do and decree it to happen as foreseen. God, in His sovereignty, will decide what will happen as part of His plan, but He does it without violating your free will. Yes, even though what decision you make was a sovereign decision of God in eternity past, your free will is still fully functioning. Yet God determines the course of your life - actually decrees it to happen exactly as He foreknew it. Confused????

Middle Knowledge

Perhaps this will help. God's knowledge of you is so intimate and so detailed that He is able to predict with absolute certainty what your actions will be when faced with any number of given circumstances that might be placed in your path. We call this “middle knowledge.” It is the knowledge of the counterfactuals, that is, what could be or is merely possible. This is more than just a simple and shallow understanding of what your decisions will be. This is a deep and intimate understanding of your soul and how you react to the “all things” of your life. With His intimate understanding of you and human nature, God is able to engineer or manage the infinitely complex human circumstances and events to drive individual free will decisions so that He arrives at His intended objective *exactly* as He had purposed.

With this middle knowledge, God is able to decree precisely what will come to pass. God's divine decree takes what is foreknown as certain and makes it certain. This is important: what God foreknows is absolutely certain to happen, not because He foreknows it, but because of the fact that he decreed it. God's foreknowledge is simply God's knowledge of His own eternal purpose. It is what God proposes to do. It is based on His sovereign decisions according to His plan and His intimate understanding of human nature—middle knowledge, with His infinite ability to control events—God's omnipotence.

Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to *his* purpose.

Summary

God's omniscience is the knowledge of all things—all things past, all things present, all things future, and includes the merely possible as well as the actual.

God's foreknowledge is a more limited aspect of His omniscience. It deals exclusively with the actual and excludes the merely possible. As a part of His omniscience, God's foreknowledge includes a deep and intimate understanding of how His creation will behave under any given set of

circumstances. Therefore, God's foreknowledge is more than just a superficial foreknowing of future human activity.

God's foreknowledge is viewed as absolutely certain. This certainty results from human free will making decisions based on circumstances controlled by God, which resulted from His intimate understanding of man.

As a free agent, man is free to choose other than what is foreknown, but such a choice would become that which is foreknown by God.

God's foreknowledge does not make anything certain. It views only that which is certain. God makes what is foreknown certain by divine decree.

Since foreknowledge is what God actually proposes to bring to pass, it is part of the divine decree. God's divine decree determines the whole order of events, from the smallest detail to the greatest.

Foreordination takes what is foreknown and determined and makes it certain. It is, therefore, part of the divine decree. It is related to the saved, the unsaved, and the "all things." Foreordination includes all that will happen in a person's life, whether he is a believer or an unbeliever. It takes God's foreknowledge and decrees it to happen as foreknown.

Predestination is that part of foreordination that is related *only* to the believer and his salvation, sanctification, and ultimate glorification. Nowhere in Scripture is it ever suggested that the unbeliever is predestined to his lost state. In fact it is said *all* are lost, but some are predestined to election.

Predestination means to "mark off" and, as such, is related conceptually to sanctification, which means to set aside as God's own.

There are two main theological views, which we will get into in more detail next lesson:

1. Armenian view is that God predestinates *only* what He foreknows.
2. The Extreme Calvinist view contends that God foreknows *only* because He has first predestined it. That is, nothing can be

foreknown as certain unless God first makes it certain through predestination.

Attempts to reconcile the order of these two great divine operatives are doomed to failure because they are not independent but *interdependent* actions of God's will. God can neither predestinate what He does not foreknow nor foreknow what He has not predestinated.

God wants believers who chose Him, and He does not coerce. Coercion brings Him no glory, but free choice does. Therefore, God chooses anyone who will freely choose Him. And through His middle knowledge, He knows exactly what influences He can bring to bear on a person short of coercion so they will freely choose Him. He also understands that for some, there is nothing He can do that will change their minds about Christ without violating their free will, which He will not do.

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

In his omnipotence, God decrees those events and influences to take place in human history that will lead all the “whoever” to a saving knowledge of Christ. ALL are called, but only the “whoever” are predestined and answer the call.

Matthew 22:14 For many are called, but few are chosen.