

WHAT DOES GOD CONTROL?
GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN SCRIPTURE

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Approaching the Topic

Labels

In orienting our minds to study what God controls, let's first consider labels. Pick up a can of Campbell's Tomato Soup and you probably won't even read those words. The label and the image on the can clearly identify the product. You know the product by the label. Labels in the history of Christian thought are more of a mixed blessing. There's no way around them, but sometimes labels are misapplied, misunderstood, and mishandled. If the Word of God is our ultimate authority, there is no need to defend a label or have an undue affinity to it. For example, is it right to insist on being "Episcopal," "Methodist," "Baptist" or a "Presbyterian"—just for the sake of the name? Surely not. But it is right to stand for truth, even the truth behind an unpopular label.

Let me put my labels on the soup can. In theological terms, the subject of this study is *the sovereignty of God, the decrees of God, providence, predestination, foreordination, election*, etc. Historically, these truths are at the heart of *Reformed theology*. Some personal names connected with this are, *St. Augustine, John Calvin, John Bunyan, John Owen, Charles Spurgeon*, etc. I certainly don't want to dispute about mere names, but I think a proper identification of these labels is honest and gets us to the content behind the name. In this study I will refer to the most basic idea underlying the issue—*God's control of reality*. Or, *What does God control?*

Chevrolets are Best and Other Biases

I have a cousin in Aberdeen, Mississippi, who has never owned a Ford automobile, but despises them. Chevrolet is the best. In the past I've even hesitated to tell him I owned a Ford. I know he will not like it—regardless of the car's real value or goodness.

We all have biases. Some biases keep us thinking Fords are bad for no real reason. (Though I did have to suffer through a horrible 1970s Mustang II in college). Still, some biases blind us to a deeper understanding. As sincere and teachable Christians, if we knew where we were wrong about points of Bible teaching, surely we would change. The problem is seeing where we are wrong. Some of us don't discover errors in our thinking about God and His Word because we are not in a context which calls for a serious consideration of the truth. Others of us simply neglect the resources which help us understand God's revelation of Himself and His purposes in the Bible. I hope this little study will help those who want to seriously consider the doctrine of God's complete control. It is my conviction a great deal more sincere agreement among

believers could take place if we would spend more time just looking at the biblical texts. Then we can ask, “What does it say?” “What does this mean?” I would not pretend this short study cites every relevant verse, solves every serious problem, or answers every objection—only the surface is scratched. Perhaps though, it may help someone more seriously think about, “What does God control?”

“Proof-texting”

Some readers may not like citing specific texts (“proof-texting”). Of course, scriptural statements can certainly be misused by those on both sides of issues. However, Jesus appealed to specific Scripture texts in overcoming Satan and often when correcting His opponents (e.g., Matt. 4:4ff, 22:29–32). The apostles appealed to specific texts (even tenses of words) (e.g., Gal. 3:16). Surely we are commanded to refute that which contradicts sound doctrine, not just generally, but specifically (Titus 1:9, 2 Tim. 4:2, 2 Tim. 3:16). We may validly use Scripture proofs, even if it is just the starting place. Laying out verses in a topical arrangement (as follows) is not where the matter *ends*, but simply where it *begins*.

Just the Facts

The police officer who makes out the reports quips, “Just the facts, ma’am.” “The facts” give us the basis for coming to a right conclusion. What are the facts about God’s control? What would it take for you to come to the conclusion God is in complete control of all things and has ordained whatever comes to pass? Remember if only one verse of God’s Word or even one *word* of God’s Word teaches something, it is true: “Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar” (Rom. 3:4). The difficulty is *one verse* is often not enough to prove *one verse* teaches it. So to convince others, one must appeal to a number of texts reinforcing the basic issue.

Most importantly, some readers may be used to reading the commentary around verses in books, but barely scanning the verses themselves. I sympathize with reading this way, as someone who reads many biblical studies. But please, if you do that with this booklet you will miss the whole point. If you only read my brief commentary and skip the verses, you will miss the heart of the matter.

* * *

What's in the Bible

“*Predestined to be conformed . . .*” I remember once quoting Romans 8:29 to a young lady who promptly responded, “That word (*predestined*) is not in the Bible!” Now perhaps I’ve misunderstood the meaning of words like *predestine, foreordain, elect, purposed, ordained, appointed*—but I’m sure they’re in the Bible. Sometimes people won’t study this subject because they dismiss it as “unbiblical.” Some think teachings on God’s complete control arise from *speculation* rather than good *interpretation*, from imposition rather than exposition. For those who will at least look at the Bible on this issue, the first place to begin is by reading the verses which address the subject. If the words and concepts at issue, like *predestine, foreordain, and elect*, are in the Bible—and they are—then to be faithful to God’s Word, we should seek what these verses teach.

God’s Control Over Creation

We should begin at the beginning: God has complete control over creation because, after all, *He created it*. He made all that exists, the entire universe. Not only did He start it; He sustains it. He continues to sustain every existent thing by His ever-present, controlling power. God *ordains* creation.

Gen. 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.¹

Col. 1:16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him and for Him.

Heb. 1:3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Col. 1:17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

It is no wonder then, the apostolic word to the philosophers in ancient Greece was, “*in Him we live and move and exist*” (Acts 17:28). Creation and the sustaining, upholding/holding-together power of God anchors the teaching of God’s control over all else. If we are biblical

theists and not Enlightenment deists (“god” only wound up a clock of creation), then we know every quark of every atom of every molecule of every entity was not only created by the triune God, but is continually sustained and directed by Him. As a matter of fact, the root of all matter is energy, and thus it is necessary that all things “hold together” by the power of God. Check your latest quantum physics on that point, stated plainly in Colossians 1:17. We could close the study at this point and conclude. God is in control to the minutest degree. We may strain to comprehend *how* a holy and righteous God could so intricately control the workings of a fallen and wicked world (without tainting Himself), but we need not ask *whether* He controls it.

God’s Control Over the Heavens

With 100 billion stars like our Sun, it is a powerful tribute to assert the whole host of all these flaming masses is “the work of Thy fingers” (Ps. 8:3). The Lord “counts the number of the stars; He gives names to all of them” (Ps. 147:4). The wonder of the variations, compositions, distances, histories, and futures of the stars is only surpassed by the majestic beauty of their testimony. According to those who study such things, every photon of light from our Sun travels 93 million miles to the earth. Amazingly, if it produced only one percent more heat, or if our atmosphere were different, or even if our clouds did not do their job in reflecting heat back into space, the earth would literally wither and die. If the Sun produced one percent less heat, the earth would soon be unbearably cold. In fact, while earth’s temperature is very constant, the Moon’s surface temperature varies 850 degrees each lunar day.² Is it not God who sets the thermostat? His control shines by day and twinkles by night. God *ordains* the heavens.

Isa. 40:26 Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these stars, the One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name; because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power not one of them is missing.

Job 9:5–10 It is God who removes the mountains, they know not how, when He overturns them in His anger; who shakes the earth out of its place, and its pillars tremble; who commands the sun not to shine, and sets a seal upon the stars; who alone stretches out the heavens, and tramples down the waves of the sea; who makes the Bear, Orion, and the Pleiades, and the chambers of the south; who does great things, unfathomable, and wondrous works without number.

Is not the case for God’s complete control settled by the heavens? Surely “the heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands” (Ps. 19:1). Ponder whether those heavenly bodies, written into every civilization’s art, literature, music, science, and religion—seen from every vantage point on this terrestrial ball—are not majestic in their persuasion. Their Maker is completely in control. Surely we must agree with Paul, “His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made” (Rom. 1:20).

God’s Control Over the Earth

Whether one visits the stars, or walks with two feet on solid ground, the testimony is in unison: God is the cosmic controller. In fact, in the mind of the biblical writers, modern scientific concepts such as “nature” and “natural law” seem to be absent. Rather, God is viewed as directly controlling the forces of nature. God’s control over these “forces” is only a dim glimmer from the giant gem of God’s actual control of all of reality. In the Christian worldview, through an elaborate development and study of secondary causes, we have science and medicine. This is true and glorious. In fact, the unbeliever has literally *no reason* to think the Sun will come up tomorrow, whereas the Christian has the covenant-keeping, Maker of heaven and earth. Let us never forget according to Scripture, the ultimate cause of all things is God. God *ordains* nature. Ultimately and finally, “All things come from Thee, and from Thy hand” (1 Chr. 29:14)!

Ps. 65:6–10 Who dost establish the mountains by His strength, being girded with might; who dost still the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the tumult of the peoples. And they who dwell in the ends of the earth stand in awe of thy signs; thou dost make the dawn and the sunset shout for joy. Thou dost visit the earth, and cause it to overflow; Thou greatly enrich it; the stream of God is full of water; Thou dost prepare their grain, for thus Thou dost prepare the earth. Thou dost water its furrows abundantly; Thou dost settle its ridges; Thou dost soften it with showers; Thou dost bless its growth.

Ps. 104:10–16 He sends forth springs in the valleys; they flow between the mountains; they give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell; they lift up their voices among the branches. He waters the mountains from His upper chambers; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of His works. He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the labor of man, so that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine which makes man’s heart

glad, so that he may make his face glisten with oil, and food which sustains man's heart. The trees of the LORD drink their fill, the cedars of Lebanon which He planted . . .

Jer. 14:22 Are there any among the idols of the nations who give rain? Or can the heavens grant showers? Is it not Thou, O LORD our God? Therefore we hope in Thee, for Thou art the one who hast done all these things.

Acts 14:17 . . . and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

God's Control Cannot Be Stopped

*Unresting, unshaking, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might
Thy justice, like mountains, is soaring above,
Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.⁴*

The Lord God rules in might and incomprehensible power. God's power is limited by nothing but His own nature. Since God is all-powerful, nothing can stop what He *actually wills to do*. The term theologians use for the ultimate will and purpose of God is *decree*. God's decrees are literally unstoppable. To say God's decrees can be stopped is to deny God is omnipotent. The verses below teach us no one "frustrates" "His plan," "resists His will," or "can ward off His hand." He "will accomplish all" His "good pleasure" and "does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth."

Isa. 46:10 Declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, "My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure."

Dan. 4:35 And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, "What hast Thou done?"

Prov.19:21 Many are the plans in a man's heart, but the counsel of the LORD, it will stand.

Isa. 14:27 For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it?

And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?

Ps. 115:3 But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.

Rom. 9:19 You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?”

God’s Control Over “Chance Events”

From our perspective many things in our daily lives are routine and trivial. We often refer to things as “random” or happening “by chance.” People commonly speak of “luck” or “coincidence.” According to the Bible, however, all events, great or small, are controlled by the hand of God. Think about it: the very concept of “chance” is something we use when we do not know the real causes. Flip a coin and someone might say “by ‘chance’ it lands on ‘heads’ or ‘tails.’” But if a complex machine could flip the coin—knowing the exact weight, room conditions and properties of the coin, controlling the exact force applied to the coin to the highest degree—it would come out just as programmed: heads or tails. Who is behind all these (commonly unknown) forces when we flip coins or roll dice? God! These events are really not “by chance” at all.

The controlling power of Almighty God is certainly not limited to those “big” events which, from our perspective, determine the course of men and nations. The Scriptures assert God is Lord over the most “random” and unpredictable actions. It must be remembered, of course, we never know the significance of the roll of the dice or the flipping of a coin. No event in the universe of the triune God is completely disconnected from *every* other event. There is simply no room for “chance” in a universe created, sustained, and ordained by an all-wise, all-powerful, personal God. But this is not to say we may not casually speak of “chance” or “luck”—rather we are saying “by chance (i.e., God’s sovereign, immutable, omnipotent power over all reality) it came up ‘heads.’”

Prov. 16:33 The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

1 Kings 22:34-35 Now a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel in a joint of the armor. So he said to the driver of his chariot, “Turn around, and take me out of the fight; for I am severely wounded.” And the battle raged that day, and the king was propped up in his chariot in front of the Arameans, and died at evening, and the blood from the wound ran into the bottom of the chariot.

Job 36:32 He covers His hands with the lightning, and commands it to strike the mark.

Jonah 1:7 And each man said to his mate, “Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us.” So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

God’s Control Over the Details

Not only are “chance” events under God’s control, He governs and determines the most minute detail of reality. God *ordains* things so small and so delicate, who could know them? It was our Lord Jesus who reminded us of the fatherly care of God. Birds, plants, hair, fish, and worms come forth to testify!

Matt. 10:29, 30 Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

Jonah 1:17 And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah 4:6–8 So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day, and it attacked the plant and it withered. And it came about when the sun came up that God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, “Death is better to me than life.”

The Heidelberg Catechism puts this all so beautifully:

What is your only comfort in life and in death? A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,⁴ and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.³

God's Control Over Nations

If God's control in the comprehensive sustaining and directing of creation, even to the level of the hairs on our head and sparrows in the sky, it should not be surprising whole nations are under His control. Truly, God is the Lord of the nations. This is not only a demonstration of this teaching about the control of God, but it is also the power source of the *Great Commission*, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:19). Because "He rules over the nations" (Ps. 22:8), we can be assured of the victory of the gospel in all the earth. His Word will not return void (Isa. 55:11)!

Acts 17:26 . . . and He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation,

Ps. 33:10–11 The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation.

Dan. 4:25 . . . that you be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place be with the beasts of the field, and you be given grass to eat like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven; and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whomever He wishes.

Prov. 21:1 The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.

Dan. 2:21 And it is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings; He gives wisdom to wise men, and knowledge to men of understanding.

God's Control Over Calamity and Evil

Of course, you may be less concerned about the sovereignty of God in the areas mentioned above, and more concerned about how God can be in control of evil and calamity. Before looking at specific texts which address this concern, it might be helpful to reflect on what has already been shown. God is creator, sustainer, director of nature and nations. Calamity and evil are often only subsets of these more broadly defined areas. How could God be controller of the nations and not control the king who makes war? Or how could God direct the earth, but not the

earthquake? Or uphold the very fabric of the universe, but be completely unconnected to the explosion of a terrorist's bomb? Many specific texts settle the question directly.

Isa. 45:5–7 I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun That there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other; the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these.

Amos 3:2–6 You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth; Therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities. Do two men walk together unless they have made an appointment? Does a lion roar in the forest when he has no prey? Does a young lion growl from his den unless he has captured something? Does a bird fall into a trap on the ground when there is no bait in it? Does a trap spring up from the earth when it captures nothing at all? If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble? If a calamity occurs in a city has not the LORD done it?

Job 1:21 And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.”

Jer. 15:2–4 And it shall be that when they say to you, “Where should we go?” then you are to tell them, “Thus says the LORD: Those destined for death, to death; and those destined for the sword, to the sword; and those destined for famine, to famine; and those destined for captivity, to captivity. And I shall appoint over them four kinds of doom, declares the LORD: the sword to slay, the dogs to drag off, and the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy. And I shall make them an object of horror among all the kingdoms of the earth because of Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah, the king of Judah, for what he did in Jerusalem.”

Jer. 18:11 So now then, speak to the men of Judah and against the inhabitants of Jerusalem saying, “Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am fashioning calamity against you and devising a plan against you. Oh turn back, each of you from his evil way, and reform your ways and your deeds.”

Prov. 16:4 The LORD has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil.

Ecc. 7:14 In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider—God has made the one as well as the other so that man may not discover anything that will be after him.

1 Sam. 16:14–16 Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD terrorized him. Saul’s servants then said to him, “Behold now, an evil spirit from God is terrorizing you. Let our lord now command your servants who are before you. Let them seek a man who is a skillful player on the harp; and it shall come about when the evil spirit from God is on you, that he shall play the harp with his hand, and you will be well.”

2 Sam. 17:14 Then Absalom and all the men of Israel said, “The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel.” For the LORD had ordained to thwart the good counsel of Ahithophel, in order that the LORD might bring calamity on Absalom.

Very personally this comes home to us all. It may sound pious to remove God from the woes of this world, but in the end it is utterly unbearable to think calamities are futile—they have literally *no purpose*. Only by asserting *God ordains even these things* are we able to say with the hymn writer,⁵

*Whate'er my God ordains is right: Though now this cup, in drinking,
May bitter seem to my faint heart, I take it all unshrinking:
My God is true each morn anew, Sweet comfort yet shall fill my heart,
And pain and sorrow shall depart.*⁴

God’s Control Over People

If God is creator, sustainer, director of the worlds, worms, nations, and even calamities, it surely follows *God controls individuals*. God ordains you and me. Many biblical texts assert this.

His Control of Our Abilities and Deformities

What do you think of when you consider the way you were made? When you see someone with a birth “defect,” what comes to mind? Do you strain to remove God from that, or are you overcome with a deep sense of reverence, gratitude, and compassion in light of the mysterious work of God through that individual’s life? Knowing it is the Lord who makes the “hearing ear and the seeing eye,” as well as the “dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind” (Prov. 20:12, Ex. 4:11)—should cause us to be humbled in our acceptance of others and grateful for our gifts and abilities. And we have to trust Him, since we may not know in what way these things will glorify God. Surely though, we should not doubt the blind may see the light of His countenance. The dumb speak words of testimony to God’s power. The deaf hear His voice, perhaps even in a

more profound way than others. “God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). If so, is not every “deformity” a display of the beauty of God on a more profound level? After all, we are all genetically, morally, and spiritually flawed, and thus we need grace and grace glasses with which to see the world.

God operates within His own revealed, covenantal framework. In His world, sin brings death. The fall of Adam resulted in all of the ill effects we so commonly observe—yet God’s glory will be revealed, though the eyes of unbelief are tightly closed.

Prov. 20:12 The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the LORD has made both of them.

Ex. 4:11 And the LORD said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?”

Ps. 139:13, 14 For Thou didst form my inward parts; Thou didst weave me in my mother’s womb. I will give thanks to Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Thy works, and my soul knows it very well.

John 9:1–3 And as He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

God Controls the Free Actions of People

Men are free, but God is more free than men. Men have a kind of control, but God is Controller. Biblical freedom and responsibility are dimensions of the dignity of man as a creature made in the image of God with covenantal obligations to his Maker. Even so, the “free” choices of individuals are determined by the sovereign will of God. Perhaps one will object: this is a contradiction. This must be discussed later, but I do not believe the idea *people freely choose what God sovereignly decrees* can be shown to be a contradiction. At any rate, the following verses, as well as many of the foregoing verses, show the controlling determination of God over even the *free* actions of people.

Prov. 16:9 The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.

Lam. 2:17 The LORD has done what He purposed; He has accomplished His word which He commanded from days of old. He has thrown down without sparing, and He has caused the enemy to rejoice over you; He has exalted the might of your adversaries.

Gen. 20:6 Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her.”

Gen. 45:9 Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, “Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay.”

Dan. 1:9 Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials . . .

Neh. 2:8 . . . and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king’s forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city, and for the house to which I will go. And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me.

Ps. 110:3 Thy people will volunteer freely in the day of Thy power; in holy array, from the womb of the dawn, Thy youth are to Thee as the dew.

God Controls the Sinful Actions of People

There’s more! God is in complete control of even the sinful acts of men. Since it has already been established the Lord’s power and control extend to worlds, nations, calamities, and the abilities and actions of individuals, it follows quite strictly even sinful actions are under God’s control. *Somehow*, God’s holiness is not marred by the sinful acts He controls.

Prov. 16:4 The LORD has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil.

Gen. 50:20 And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

Luke 22:22 For indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!

Acts 2:23 . . . this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men

and put Him to death.

Acts 4:27, 28 For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.

Deut. 2:30 But Sihon king of Heshbon was not willing for us to pass through his land; for the LORD your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, in order to deliver him into your hand, as he is today.

Ex. 9:12 And the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not listen to them, just as the LORD had spoken to Moses.

Ex. 10:1 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may perform these signs of Mine among them . . ."

Josh. 11:20 For it was of the LORD to harden their hearts, to meet Israel in battle in order that he might utterly destroy them, that they might receive no mercy, but that he might destroy them, just as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Isa. 63:17 Why, O LORD, dost Thou cause us to stray from Thy ways, and harden our heart from fearing Thee? Return for the sake of Thy servants, the tribes of Thy heritage.

John 12:37–40 But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him; that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke, "LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT? AND TO WHOM HAS THE ARM OF THE LORD BEEN REVEALED?" For this cause they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, "HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES, AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART; LEST THEY SEE WITH THEIR EYES, AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED, AND I HEAL THEM."

No matter how objectionable decreeing evil may be at first, the specific texts above call us to revere God's power over even the sinful acts of men. Even more, if the most heinous of all acts—the murder of the spotless, sinless, Lamb of God—was "predestined to occur," then why should we object to God's sovereignty over other wicked acts which hardly compare to the sinfulness of killing Jesus? The Bible is crystal clear in saying when Herod, Pilate, the Romans, and Israel gathered

together to murder Jesus in that most torturous, wicked, and inhumane way, it was what, “Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur” (Acts 4:27). We can now see the goodness of God in this evil act, *which act is the very ground of our salvation.*

We should also rest assured on the basis of God’s unchangeable Word, “ God causes *all things* to work together for good to those who love God” (Rom. 8:28). Though for now, we do not know—and certainly have not the mental capacity to fully understand—the purpose for each act of evil in the world.

God Ordains the Days of Our Lives

The sovereign Lord of heaven and earth completely controls worlds, nations, calamities, individuals, even sinful actions. Does it surprise us to learn all the days of our lives somehow “were ordained” (Ps. 139:16)? God somehow holds the script of our lives, from birth to death, from conception to consummation. Though we do not know what the future will hold, we should reflect on this in reverence and obey His revealed will. Ultimately, God has decreed what will come to pass, even to the minutest detail. Because of this, the Word tells us our plans should be guided by this truth, “If the Lord wills . . .” (James 4:15). This is illustrated when Paul left Ephesus. He said, “I will return to you again *if God wills*” (Acts 18:21). The Latin phrase which translates “if God wills” is *Deo volente*, sometimes abbreviated “D.V.” So, it is right to plan, and we can hardly avoid it, but we must remember all we intend is *Deo volente*.

Ps. 22:9, 10 Yet Thou art He who didst bring me forth from the womb; Thou didst make me trust when upon my mother's breasts. Upon Thee I was cast from birth; Thou hast been my God from my mother's womb.

Ps. 71:6 By Thee I have been sustained from my birth; Thou art He who took me from my mother's womb; my praise is continually of Thee.

Ps. 139:16 Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Thy book they were all written, the days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them.

Num. 24:23 And he took up his discourse and said, “Alas, who can live except God has ordained it?”

Prov. 20:24 Man’s steps are ordained by the LORD, how then can man understand his way?

Job 14:1–5 Man, who is born of woman, Is short-lived and full of turmoil.

Like a flower he comes forth and withers. He also flees like a shadow and does not remain. Thou also dost open Thine eyes on him, and bring him into judgment with Thyself. Who can make the clean out of the unclean? No one! Since his days are determined, the number of his months is with Thee, and his limits Thou hast set so that he cannot pass.

James 4:13–15 Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that.”

God’s Control Over Judgment

It is abundantly clear God’s sovereign determination extends from the course of the stars to the paths of fish in the seas, from the cradle to the grave. The Bible asserts God controls even the judgment of the wicked. We are told the wicked were “made” for “the day of evil.” Their “doom” was “appointed,” and they were “long beforehand marked out for this condemnation.” God *ordains* this, too.

Prov. 16:4 The LORD has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil.

Rom. 9:10–17 And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God’s purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, “THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER.” Just as it is written, “JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED.” What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, “I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.” So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.”

1 Pet. 2:8 . . . and, “A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE”; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

Judges 1:4 For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Acts 1:16 Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.

Acts 1:25 . . . to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.

John 17:12 While I was with them, I was keeping them in Thy name which Thou hast given Me; and I guarded them, and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

God's Control in Salvation

Given all that has been said, should it surprise us that the Scripture teaches salvation is also controlled by God? God's determining power extends not only to creation, sustaining the stars, directing heaven and earth, calamitous events, the days of our lives, free actions, sinful actions, and judgment—but *especially* salvation. He delights in the gracious deliverance of His children. The Bible says those who know Him and are known by Him were "chosen before the foundation of the world," and it was "granted" that they "believe," that they were "made alive" by God, were "appointed to eternal life," and were "predestined to the adoption as sons." In short, it is "by His doing you are in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:30). Hallelujah! God *ordains* salvation! If after reading this section, you still have a controversy in your heart, realize all I am saying can be summarized in one word, *Grace!* Or in a short sentence, *God saves sinners!*

God's Control of Who Will Be Saved

*'Tis not that I did choose Thee, For Lord, that could not be;
This heart would still refuse Thee, Hadst Thou not chosen me.
Thou from the sin that stained me Hast cleansed and set me free;
Of old Thou hast ordained me, That I should live to Thee.⁶*

What Christian could say, "No, I chose Him first!" or "I would have come even apart from His grace." On the contrary, since the Fall resulted in depravity for every son of Adam and daughter of Eve, *God* must change the hearts of those who will be saved (Rom. 3:10–20). We are powerless to change ourselves. As Jeremiah 13:23 says, "Can the

Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil.” We are all “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3) and our hearts are “desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9, KJV). If we are to be saved, He must furnish us with all that necessarily brings us to salvation, including opening our ears to hear and embrace the gospel, changing our evil natures by His Spirit, and granting us saving faith. In short, if we are to be saved, *God must save us*. Once this is believed, we rejoice in a truly “amazing grace.” Our salvation is “to the praise of the glory of His grace” (Eph 1:6).

Eph. 1:4–6 . . . just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

2 Tim. 1:9 . . . who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity . . .

2 Thes. 2:13 But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.

1 Thes. 1:4 . . . knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you.

Rom. 8:28–33 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect?

1 Cor. 1:30, 32 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, “LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.”

Matt. 25:34 Then the King will say to those on His right, “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from

the foundation of the world.”

1 Thes. 5:9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ . . .

John 6:37, 44, 45 All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. . . . No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, “AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.” Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me.

John 6:65 And He was saying, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father.”

John 17:9 I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom Thou hast given Me; for they are Thine.

In the beautiful hymn, “How Sweet and Awful is the Place,” Isaac Watts asks,

*Why was I made to hear Thy voice
And enter while there's room,
When thousands make a wretched choice
And rather starve than come?
'Twas the same love that spread the feast
That sweetly drew us in;
Else we had still refused to taste, And perished in our sin.⁷*

God's Control of Understanding and Knowledge

Even our knowledge of God is controlled by His sovereignty. It comes by the direct illumination of God by His grace. Surely our pride is crushed when we recognize even our understanding of salvation has been granted to us. It does not come from ourselves—we have been shown it by grace. Of ourselves we could not muster one iota of saving truth without the mercy of the Spirit of truth. As I recently heard a new Christian proclaim, “People can't show you God, only God can show you God.” To be sure, God uses people as instruments to reveal Himself, but what “graceling” would contest Jesus' own words, “Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 16:17)?

John 3:27 John answered and said, “A man can receive nothing, unless it has been given him from heaven.”

Matt. 13:11 And He answered and said to them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.”

Luke 8:10 And He said, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, in order that SEEING THEY MAY NOT SEE, AND HEARING THEY MAY NOT UNDERSTAND.”

Matt. 16:17 And Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.”

John 12:39, 40 For this cause they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, “HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES, AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART; LEST THEY SEE WITH THEIR EYES, AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED, AND I HEAL THEM.”

God’s Control of Spiritual Birth

Not only does God determine who will be saved and open their ears to hear the glorious gospel, He resurrects them from the spiritual tomb by the work of His Spirit. Believers are born again by the Wind of Heaven, the blessed Holy Spirit who blows over the stone-cold hearts of those who were “dead in their transgressions and sins.” Those who receive Christ are not born “of the will of man, but of God.” We didn’t do it; God “caused us to be born again.” Like Lazarus, stinking, wrapped with our sins, and sealed in the tomb, we needed the power of God to make “us alive together with Christ.”

John 1:12, 13 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

John 3:8 The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.

1 Pet. 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead . . .

Eph. 2:5 . . . even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) . . .

Col 2:13 And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions . . .

Titus 3:5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit . . .

God's Control of Repentance and Faith

Some who hate the truth of God's complete control over salvation only attack a "straw man" of an argument. "If God chooses who will be saved, why believe? Why repent?" Of course, the Word teaches us faith is a prerequisite for salvation. Saving faith in Christ is a conscious, willful act, but the Bible says *God gives us faith*. If God grants faith as a gift, then faith (with Christ as its object) does not originate in the person to be saved. A man must repent and believe, but belief and repentance doesn't originate from the sinful person: it is the response of grace. Trusting in Christ is alien to those who are "hostile toward God" (Rom. 8:7). Put this to the test of Scripture: does the Bible teach faith is given by God or mustered by men?

Eph. 2:8, 9 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.

Phil. 1:29 For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake . . .

Acts 16:14 And a certain woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.

Acts 13:48 And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

2 Tim. 2:24, 25 And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth . . .

Acts 5:31 He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.

Acts 11:18 And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.”

The conclusion is clear: God gives faith! God grants repentance! I wonder how many have unknowingly mouthed these very truths in the wonderful hymn, “I Know Whom I Have Believed.”

*I know not how this saving faith to me He did impart,
Nor how believing in His word wrought peace within my heart.
I know not how the Spirit moves, convincing men of sin,
Revealing Jesus through the word, creating faith in Him.*⁸

God’s Control of the Atonement

Salvation is God’s gracious and merciful plan from beginning to end, and He most certainly has the power to make it happen. Hallelujah! Those who will be saved are chosen by God, enlightened by God, made alive by God, and gifted by God with repentance and faith. Surely it is the world’s greatest understatement to say the *cross of Christ, too, was planned by God*. Redemptive history flows to Calvary and back again. That Christ’s death was predetermined of God cannot be questioned (Acts 2:23)—but for what reason? Was it to make men merely able to save themselves? Many biblical texts tell us Christ’s death accomplished redemption for a definite group of people.

Bible-believing Christians would never deny some will be lost for eternity. Hell is real. We all must admit, then, Christ did not prevent the wrath of God from abiding on those who do not trust in Him. Therefore, His death, though *sufficient* to save a million worlds from the wrath of God, was actually *efficient* only for those who will be saved. To put it directly, whose sins did Christ bear?

Matt. 1:21 And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins.

Isa. 53:5-12 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities . . . He was cut off out of the land of the living, For the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? . . . He would render Himself as a guilt offering . . . By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. . . . He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the

transgressors.

John 10:11 I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.

John 10:14, 15 I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.

John 11:51, 52 Now this he did not say on his own initiative; but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

Eph 5:25, 26 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word . . .

1 Pet. 2:24 . . . and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

2 Cor. 5:21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Heb. 9:12 . . . and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.

Titus 2:14 . . . who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

The English hymn writer, William Cowper said it well:

*There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.
Dear dying Lamb,
Thy precious blood Shall never lose its power;
Till all the ransomed church of God
Be saved, to sin no more.⁹*

God's Control of All Things

We've been looking, as it were, in a microscope at many specific areas of the sovereign control of God. Now we can look through the lens of the telescope at the sweeping statements asserting His sovereign rule. In the broadest possible terms—God is in complete control. The domain of His rule is, quite simply, *everything*. The Lord has decreed whatever happens. From the beginning to the end, from the creation to the consummation, from the heavens to the earth, from the sky to the sea, from conception to glorification—the sovereign Lord is the One in complete control. “His sovereignty rules over all” (Ps. 103:19). God *ordains all things*.

Isa. 46:9, 10 Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, “My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.”

Eph. 1:11 . . . also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will . . .

Rom. 11:36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

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

1 Cor. 8:6 . . . yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.

Ps. 103:19 The LORD has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all.

Objections to God's Sovereignty

In what has gone before, the biblical texts are presented clearly and directly. While I think it is clear the Bible asserts the sovereign control of God over all, in all, and through all, there are still objections with which to grapple. So in what follows, it will be necessary to reason according to the Scriptures (Acts 17:2, 17; 18:4; 19:9).

Objection: God Foreknows But Does Not Determine

One popular objection is “foreknowledge.” These verses only teach God’s *knowledge of future events rather than His determination of them*. There are only a handful of references to God’s foreknowledge in the Bible (Acts 2:23, Rom. 8:29, 11:2, 1 Pet. 1:2, 20). In responding to the *foreknowledge objection*, we will consider each of the passages using these terms.

A Biblical Study of Foreknowledge

Whatever is involved in the foreknowing of an all-knowing Being, in the Bible the Greek words (*prognosis/proginosko*) do not describe God’s foreknowing as only His simple *before-knowing* of an individual’s destiny. For example, there’s nothing like, “God foreknew their unbelief (and therefore, they were not elected unto salvation).” In biblical terms, God never “foreknows” a non-saved/elected person. Interestingly, *foreknowledge is a term of affection*. The Cross was “by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23).” Those “He foreknew” are “to become conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29). Israel is described as “His people whom He foreknew” (Rom. 11:2). Scattered believers, though aliens in this world, are chosen of God “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood” (1 Pet. 1:2). Lastly, Jesus Himself “was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you” (1 Pet. 1:20). To be *foreknown* in every New Testament reference is to be in a relationship of God’s special redemptive design, love, and calling.

In the same way, “know” is often used in the Bible as a kind of intimate knowledge, foreknowledge of God is a before-intimate-knowledge, it is a redeeming before-love. For example, in John 17:25, Jesus says, “The world has not known Thee, yet I have known Thee” (cf.

1 Pet. 1:20). Moreover, this is true in the use of these words in the Greek translation of the Old Testament.¹⁰ “Adam *knew* [*ginosko*] Eve his wife; and she conceived . . .” (Gen. 4:1). Amos 3:2 says, “You [Israel] only have I chosen [*ginosko*] among all the families of the earth.” The marvel of this is the all-knowing Holy One says to His people, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness” (Jer. 31:3).

Bare Foreknowledge

Now certainly God knows the future. This knowledge, though, is not a *bare foreknowing* of what will happen without control of it. Whatever God knows, He knows certainly. What God knows to be certain cannot be otherwise (or change at some point in the future). If God knew from all eternity I will choose option A, then in history when I make that choice, I will choose A—God would be wrong if I chose B, so this cannot be. B can't be if B isn't known by God. Hence, “to B or not to B” is determined by God. God knows what *actually* will happen. *We* may guess about what *might* happen. What *might* happen can change; *our* best guess may be wrong. But what *actually* will happen cannot change (by its very definition, *it is actual*). God's knowledge is not what *might* happen, but what will, *in fact*, happen.

How does God know all of this? At first glance one may propose that God looks down the “corridor of time” to see what will happen—sort of a crystal ball approach to divine foreknowledge. But surely, the infinite God does not learn from His finite creatures, whom He created for His own glory in the first place. It becomes clear from understanding God's omniscience (knowledge of all) and His independence from His creatures, He does not elect someone because He sees they first chose Him. Aside from explicit verses to the contrary (John 15:16; 1 John 4:19), this kind of bare foreknowledge would mean God is dependent (in His knowledge) on creatures whom He intricately knitted together in the womb and through every breath continually sustains. God does not learn from His creation. Romans 11:34 makes this perfectly clear: “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became his counselor?” If God's knowledge depended on the actions of His free creatures, how could God's knowledge of future events (to us) be certain? God's knowledge could not be certain if it depended on the interactions of the myriads of whims of creatures, not to mention malevolent demonic entities. The certainty of God's knowledge of future things comes intricately bound to His complete control of all things in the decrees of His sovereign purposes. Mere foreknowledge would be useless without the omnipotent power to control all things.

Objection: This Denies Freedom and Responsibility

This objection concerns the complete control of God removing the genuine free will of man and, therefore, his responsibility and culpability for his actions. This is the typical *Robot Objection*. If God predestines us, then we are robots or automatons, have no freedom, and cannot be blamed for our actions, either. This has to be the most oft-repeated objection to the doctrine of God's complete control. Though it is almost predictable the objector will first go here, still it is very important because it strikes both at the nature of God and a right understanding of man.

Not a Contradiction

I do not believe it is a contradiction to say *people freely choose what God sovereignly decrees*. By "free choice" I mean we are unconstrained, not coerced, and wish to do that which we choose. By "sovereign decree" I mean what God determines to take place in the universe and from eternity. It strikes me as a challenge to God's omnipotence to say God *cannot* decree a choice which is unconstrained and which a person consciously wishes to do. When it is insisted man's free choice and God's sovereign decrees are contradictory, God and man are placed on the same level. But think about it. God is eternal; God made all that is; God is the sustainer of all that is; God's knowledge is not dependent on creatures; God never learns, but is omniscient. *God is God*. God's power is limited only by His own nature. How is decreeing the outcomes of free choices a violation of His nature?

The trouble comes when we reason from our own experience. As a human being, I cannot ensure the outcome of another human being's choice without coercion. I can put a gun to your head and say, "Choose vanilla!" Or maybe I could guess you'll choose vanilla, based on your past ice cream preferences. What I can't do is *guarantee* you'll choose vanilla (without constraining you). But God can! How? I don't know. But it seems plain He does not do it by constraint, by a violation of our "free" internal choice, or by purely physical/materialistic causes (genetics and environment). What we do, we do freely. The Bible declares both God's absolute control and determination of all things, and our real, non-coerced freedom.

Pavlov's Dog

While we are not "free" to thwart God's sovereign decrees, neither are we Pavlov's dogs or Skinner's pigeons. There is a kind of secular, materialistic determinism, popularly connected to B.F. Skinner, called

behaviorism. Skinner calls his view “scientific.” But he says the belief man is free and responsible is “prescientific view.”¹¹ In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971), he says,

A person’s behavior is determined by a genetic endowment traceable to the evolutionary history of the species and by the environmental circumstances to which as an individual he has been exposed. (p. 96)

The robot analogy breaks down in its denial of the *dignity of man* as created in the image of God. It does not make sense of the complexities and intricacies of the way God brings about His decrees. Men are not biological machines who are automatons. We are eternal beings (“never-dying souls”) who sit in the driver’s seats of our own lives. Behaviorism, or any other variation of non-Christian determinism, must reduce man to something he is not. For Skinner and others, man is a bag of chemical reactions responding to stimuli in the material world. For secular determinists, man is an animal, a grown-up germ, or a central nervous system of stimulated responses. On the contrary, the Word of God asserts in fascination, “Thou hast made him a little lower than God, and dost crown him with glory and majesty! Thou dost make him to rule over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet” (Ps. 8:5-6). When God’s sovereignty is reduced to the genetic robot analogy, our imaginations are asleep. A robot may be the best we can imagine in predetermining. We can mechanistically program machines—robots, if you will. But don’t try to pull God off the throne to be limited like a man. God can ordain whatsoever comes to pass without violating the freedom of His free creatures and without removing their responsibility.

Still Responsible

Many object if we are not completely *undetermined*, there is no sense in blaming us for our wrong doings and rewarding us for our good deeds. After all, we do not hold those incapable of recognizing good and evil as culpable for a crime they unknowingly committed. If men are predetermined by God, how can God hold them responsible for their actions?

What is so interesting about this objection even more than all the others is the Bible directly asks this and answers it! I am afraid, however, many will not be happy with the answer.

So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, “*Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?*” On the contrary, who are you, O man, who

answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? (Rom. 9:18–20, emphasis mine)

Why does God still find fault with us if He wills all we do? The answer is very direct. *He made us*. God made us such that we are responsible for our actions and culpable simply because *we do them*. Since we want to do what we do, that is enough for us to be accountable.¹² In the larger context of the passage it is clear those who believe they *deserve* salvation will ever be denied, but those who know they themselves are unworthy and claim nothing of themselves shall receive it freely through faith in Jesus. Thus, an extreme form of pride and wickedness in the face of God’s gracious offer of salvation is to blame God for finding fault in *unbelief*.

Perhaps someone will say, “Yes, but if you’re right, a person’s sin or unbelief is foreordained by God—so they didn’t ‘have a choice.’” What is being suggested is *if a person could not have done otherwise then they cannot legitimately be held accountable for an action*. Let me call this the *accountability principle*. This is an important principle that seems intuitive enough. We apply it frequently in our legal system and in our personal dealings with others. But what is meant by “could”? It seems a person is fully culpable for an action if that person is not coerced (against one’s will) and possesses all the faculties (of mind and body) to do otherwise.

This principle should be considered carefully in light of the biblical information. It was “by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” that Christ died “by the hands of godless men” (Acts 2:23). Is it possible to say, for example, those who nailed Christ to the cross *could have done otherwise*, even though the Bible says the cross was according to the predetermined plan of God? I believe we can make sense of the *accountability principle* and still maintain the predetermination of God in this way: the soldiers who crucified Christ *could have done otherwise* in this sense—they had the physical/mental abilities necessary to refuse to crucify Christ. They had all the faculties of mind and body to do otherwise, and they were not coerced against their own internally “free” desires.

Nevertheless, they *could not have* done otherwise in another sense—in the sense of not doing what God had *ordained* in His wise and holy decrees. Therefore, when someone objects to God’s sovereign control

because of the accountability principle, we must ask the objector to demonstrate how our account of responsibility fails in light of our common experience and moreover, in light of Scripture. While we struggle to penetrate the exact relationship of responsibility, freedom, and the varying kinds of ability, it should be enough for us to agree, God in His holiness is able to predetermine things which include even wickedness and hold those individual sinners responsible. Sinners are responsible because they did what they *wanted* to do and were not coerced. If one wants to deny the sufficiency of this kind of explanation, the future must be open-ended, with no decreed ends at all. The objector is really saying what comes to pass, to a very great extent, rests with the whims of men and devils. Of course, this turns out not to be a Christian view at all.

Objection: This Makes God the Author of Evil

Does the complete control of God bring His character into question, making Him the author of evil? This is the *Fish Objection*: it tries to get God off the hook. By proclaiming God is not in control of the evil in the world, God is off the hook from being the “author of evil.” Think of this, though: our knowledge of sin is from the same Book which teaches us God cannot sin. God is completely righteous and yet sin entered the world. Unless one wants to maintain God was not powerful enough to prevent sin from entering the world, the problem remains. God is completely righteous, and being completely righteous God *let* sin enter into the good world. At this point someone might say, “But wait, He didn’t plan for sin to enter the world!” But then what are you going to say? “But it got in there anyway?” Did God not know sin would be the result of free creatures’ choices? Of course, He did.

Someone might also argue, if angels and human beings were to be free, sin was at least possible, if not inevitable. In this understanding, God *could not* make free creatures without permitting them to sin. On this understanding, God could not *guarantee* free creatures would always choose good rather than evil. This last statement, though, is clearly false. I take it as evangelical truth that in heaven we will not sin. God will guarantee we choose good forever. “We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2b).

Of the position, *free will necessitates the possibility of sin*, we must ask, how is God “off the hook” more so than if free will does *not* necessitate the possibility of sin? One way or the other, God makes a world, He knows beforehand will have sin in it. If we are to maintain God’s ability to prevent sin in the world and God’s complete righteousness, we must

conclude, God has a good reason for letting sin (through the non-coerced choices of His creatures) into the world. Because of the goodness of God, we must conclude, God has a morally justifiable reason for sin in the world. This is what Paul is promising in Romans 8:28. That God causes all things to work together (*synergeo*) for good. In the end it will be clear, what was meant for evil by men and devils, God meant for good (Gen. 50:20).

In the end, maintaining God is *not* the determiner of all things (even evil) does not “get God off the hook,” as though He were really on it in the first place. The only way to really avoid the tension here is to assert God did not know evil would enter the world, or God was simply not powerful enough to stop it. This a higher price than any Christian should pay to resolve this tension.¹⁴

No atheist who has denied the faith on the grounds of the problem of evil will be persuaded because a Christian claims “free will” is the answer to evil. They will charge (rightly), if God is all-powerful he should have prevented evil. Free will really does not fix the larger problem. I think free will is part of the explanation of *how* God permitted sin without being “author” of it. That is, left to the freedom of their own will our first parents, as well as Satan and other angels, sinned; however, they were created uprightly (Gen. 1:27, 31; Ezek. 28:15).

God, for a justifiable and righteous reason, did not prevent their sin, though (being all-powerful) He could have. We can only conclude God has a greater and more righteous purpose than is immediately apparent in allowing sin in the world. Though we may not be able to fully explain the purpose for suffering and evil (now), we know God does indeed use it in our lives (Rom. 8:28–29). The contemporary hymn writer, Margaret Clarkson, says this so beautifully in the second and third verses of the hymn, “O Father, You are Sovereign.”

*O Father, you are sovereign in all affairs of man.
No pow'r of death or darkness can thwart Your perfect plan.
All chance and change transcending,
supreme in time and space.
You hold Your trusting children secure in your embrace.*

*O Father, You are sovereign, the Lord of human pain.
Transmuting earthly blessings to gold of heav'nly gain.
All evil overruling, as none but conqu'ror could.
Your love pursues its purpose—our souls' eternal good.*¹⁵

It is important to note here, this does not leave the Christian in a position of irrationality and “blind faith” against the atheistic objector. The atheistic objector usually attacks the Christian with the “problem of evil,” as if it proves the God of Scripture cannot (rationally) exist. The dilemma may be stated in this way: (a) If God is all good He *should* prevent all evil, (b) if God is all powerful He *could* prevent all evil, (c) since evil exists, such a God (both all-good and all-powerful) does not exist.

A straightforward, logical answer to this dilemma is the Christian conception of God’s goodness simply does not entail (a) God *should* prevent all evil. The Bible teaches both that God is good and that He does not always prevent evil. Thus, premise (a) is not to be maintained by the biblical Christian. More fundamental to the issue, however, is whether the atheist, *on his own principles*, can demonstrate there is evil in the world. Atheists must borrow the fundamentally theistic concept of an absolute standard of righteousness in order to even assert evil exists.

Nevertheless, Christians should maintain evil cannot cohabit *eternally* with an all-good, all-powerful, infinite being. We cannot permit a “light force” vs. “dark force” Star Wars heresy. Perhaps, then, we can restate the problem in this way: (a) If God is all good He *should eliminate* evil, (b) if God is all powerful He *could eliminate* evil, (c) since evil exists, our God *will eliminate* evil. This is *exactly what the Bible predicts!*

Objection: This Removes Responsibility for Evangelism

A burned out Baptist preacher-turned “hyper-Calvinist” once told me the elect could be saved reading the *Sears and Roebuck Catalog*. That the doctrine of God’s control removes the need for evangelism is what I will call the “*Sears and Roebuck Catalog Objection*.” This individual denied our legitimate responsibilities to do evangelism and missions; the historic, Reformed position on this question, however, does not deny our missionary responsibilities. In fact, the entire modern missionary movement was birthed from Reformed theology. Men like John Eliot, David Brainerd, William Carey, Adoniram Judson, and John Paton, all held God was completely in control, and yet they certainly were responsible and called by God to declare the Good News.

The short but quite sufficient answer to this objection is simply, *God ordains the means as well as the end*. God’s purposes are chain-linked to the ways of accomplishment He intends. We are simply called to be faithful to the means and leave the results to God. It is our responsibility to pray and preach, and His responsibility to convict and convert. If individuals are converted, then we are sure God did the converting, but God tells us to preach the gospel to fallen sinners (Rom. 1:16; 10:14).

The confusion here is between the moral will of God and the sovereign will of God. The moral will (or prescriptive will) of God is to be obeyed. His moral will is a reflection of His moral character. It is grounded in His righteous nature and perfect attributes. The sovereign will (or *decretive* will) of God is “whatsoever comes to pass.” It is what God has, in eternity past, determined to come to pass through nature and the free actions of His creatures. The sovereign plan God has decreed is grounded in His wisdom and His personal intentions to bring glory to Himself.

We know *some* of God’s sovereign will after the fact and some of it before it comes to pass through His prophetic Word. Of course, much of what God has determined is hidden from us as limited, frail, finite creatures. For example, the interior of the earth, the depth of the sand at the bottom of the ocean, the exact number, size, and movement of the stars, and an incalculable number of other things are simply hidden from us. All such “unknowns” are known to God and willed by God. Perhaps in the expansion of scientific investigation we will learn a great deal more of these matters and, in glory, perhaps even more. Nonetheless, the Bible says plainly, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29). If someone claims something to be “the will of God,” we must ask “*which* will?” If someone says, “It is God’s will that all believe the gospel,” we can agree that this is the moral will of God, since it is commanded. However, it is perfectly obvious from Scripture and experience, God has not *decreed* that all believe (His sovereign will). When someone objects to any commandment because of the sovereign decrees of God, they are confusing the commandments of God (e.g., to evangelize) with the sovereign will of God (e.g., in election).

God’s Personal Control is Not “Fatalism”

It becomes clear, therefore, the biblical view is not *fatalism*, which is the view *ends are determined apart from means*. Sometimes this is connected with the Islamic concept of god (Allah). However, the God of the Bible is a living, triune, personal God, and His providential work is accomplished by, through, and with the natural and free actions of His creatures, including the actions of the God-Man, Jesus. The Bible also records supernatural and unexpected changes in the way God normally sustains the natural order, i.e., *miracles*. The Scriptural doctrine of God’s complete control is not fatalism, because God’s plan, though comprehensive to every detail (even the number of hairs on our heads), is accomplished *concurrently* with the regular course of creation. If fatalism were the case,

the world would be a jumbled mess of effects without causes.

Fatalism flows from the pagan concept of *fate*, an unavoidable destiny, apart from means. It is a predetermined end of the road. But who predetermined it? In the old Greek mythology where this concept is quite strong, *no one predetermines fate*. Fate just *is*. Even the Greek gods are servants of fate. Fate is fate with no larger rhyme or reason. But if there were “fate,” there would be something above God. The Greek gods were like big humans, just stronger and with some weird superpowers. In the final analysis they had to make something out of this world of fate and chance just like the mortals. They interacted with fate events and, though they were stronger than men, they had to fight the real god too, Chance-Fate. *Fortuna*, the pagan concept of fortune or chance was like a wheel that rolled around to give some happy mortal a break. And, of course, it became personified as a goddess and worshiped. The *fortuna rota* still rolls in the game-show world—it is the *wheel of fortune*.

When someone charges the biblical concepts of God’s decrees, predestination, election, and controlling power with being “fatalistic,” they are not only lacking in biblical *theology*, they are confused about Greek *mythology*. The triune God of the Bible is over all. There is nothing over God or out of His control. God is the determiner of all possibility. There are no possibilities outside of the infinite, tri-personal God. It is His personal will that governs all, not an impersonal chance-fate.

Objection: Specific Passages

You may still have questions about specific verses. I have chosen these both because of their popularity and because of their difficulty.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Jesus’s words to Nicodemus in John 3 often become the “proof” God is not sovereign in salvation. Christians sometimes claim God does not decide who will be saved, rather it is . . . “whosoever will” (Rev 22:17). The thrust of the objection is God loves and sent His Son for every single person (the world), not just “the elect.” Christ came into the world for every person, if they would only *will themselves* into salvation. While it is certainly true whoever believes will be saved, the emphasis of the objector that “world” means every individual is misplaced, both in a contextual study and in the fullest biblical theology.

First, note Jesus is speaking to “Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews” (v. 1) regarding Christ’s Messianic ministry (v. 2) and the “kingdom of God” (vv. 3, 5). The well-known Greek scholar, A. T. Robertson, says of Nicodemus, “He knew only Jews as members of that kingdom, the political kingdom of Pharisaic hope which was to make all the world Jewish (Pharisaic) under the King Messiah.”¹⁸ It is important to realize Christ’s discussion of being “born again” is not disconnected from the prophetic coming of the kingdom of God in the Messianic age to all nations. This is the very subject of their conversation.¹⁹ The Messianic age, the “regeneration” or new birth, the kingdom of God, and the gospel to the nations are woven together throughout the Old Testament prophecies which Nicodemus should have known: “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?” (v. 10). Jesus’ discussion of the new birth was not “new revelation” completely unknown to the Old Testament (e.g., Ezek. 36:26, Jer. 31:33). For example, in Isaiah 59:19–60:4ff the essential terms and concepts of this dialogue are found: the wind, the Messiah, the new birth, and the world (nations). “For He will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the LORD drives. And a Redeemer will come to Zion. . . . My Spirit which is upon you. . . . Nations will come to your light.” Given the Old Testament literary context of these terms and concepts, the word “world” (*cosmos*) emphasizes Gentiles, as well as Jews. The objector has missed the richness of the Messianic age when he says the “world” in John 3:16 is “every person” over against “a select few.” The “elect” are not few anyway. Rather, the same writer, John, says there will be a “multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues” (Rev. 7:9). This may be more controversial than God’s sovereignty, but it goes hand in hand. “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, And all the families of the nations will worship before You. For the kingdom is the LORD’S And He rules over the nations” (Ps. 22:27–28).

More to the heart, however, I suspect the real objection here is belief in the sovereignty of God in salvation kills evangelism (see the discussion above). Let’s grant, then, our understanding of God’s sovereignty should never squelch zeal to tell the gospel to everyone, to every individual possible. It is biblically consistent to proclaim both whoever believes in Christ will be saved *and* God from all eternity sovereignly purposes to save “a world” of people. God saves all the “whoever’s” who do, in fact, believe. “Whosoever will” believe, will be saved. Yes! But *who* will? Who will believe? Who will come to Christ? The doctrine of God’s sovereignty in salvation is the answer to that question. In plain language, three chapters later in John, Jesus Himself says, “No one can come to Me,

unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day” (6:44). Later in the same chapter Jesus repeats this,

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. And He was saying, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father.” (John 6:63–65)

Could it be clearer? “No one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father” (6:65). The “whosoever” that *actually will* are those whom the Father draws and grants to come to Christ. Notice, too, Christ proclaimed “come to Me” to those whom *He knew would not come!* How much more should we proclaim it, since we *don’t know who will come.* Therefore, we should preach with urgency that Christ came in order that whoever will believe will be saved *and* that when a person believes we must say it was granted by the Father—to God be the glory.

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

Is this passage inconsistent with the teaching God chooses to save only some? Perhaps God does not decree for any to perish, and the salvation of each individual is simply not up to God. According to this reasoning, salvation is ultimately up to the individual “freewill,” rather than the God of grace. Indeed, this is the driving concern behind almost every objection. The Southern Baptist founder, J.L. Dagg said there is “some lurking idea that it is safer to trust in something else than in God’s absolute mercy.”²¹ But don’t you see, no one would come to Jesus except for God’s grace ordered in His sovereign will.

On God’s “will” for salvation: the term for “willing” in the King James Version (Greek, *boulomai*) is often translated “wishing,” as it is here in the NASB, ASV, NAB, and RSV.²² Likewise, in the NIV and NRSV it is translated “wanting.” God does not “want” or “wish” for anyone to perish, but in the perfect justice of the counsel of His will, He has not decreed that *all* be saved. In other words, God in the gracious, kind intention of *decretive will* has predestined to save many, though His justice does not require the salvation of any. Still, the “heart of God”—His

wish, His want, His desire—is for *all* to repent. Calvin says on this verse, “This is His wondrous love towards the human race, that He desires all men to be saved, and is prepared to bring even the perishing to safety.”²³ Second, in the flow of the passage, Peter addresses false teachers: “There will also be false teachers among you . . .” (2:1). This text speaks a word of mercy for those who err from truth to come to repentance (2 Tim. 2:25). The passage, then, is a call for repentance commanded of men, but granted by God (Acts 17:30, 5:31, 11:18, 2 Tim. 2:25). It does not address the question of the decrees of God directly. Calvin says, “No mention is made here of the secret decree of God by which the wicked are doomed to their own ruin, but only of His loving-kindness as it is made known to us in the Gospel. There God stretches out His hand to all alike, but He only grasps those (in such a way as to lead to Himself) whom He has chosen before the foundation of the world.”²⁴

1 Tim. 2:3-6 This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony borne at the proper time.

In the first section, the passage is very similar to 2 Peter 3:9. God “desires all men to be saved.” There is no need to duplicate my comments above. However, the successive verses are still at issue. How could God’s selection in salvation be true if Christ gave Himself, “a ransom for all” (v. 6)? Here, as in other places, we must understand “all” in context. If Christ was an atoning sacrifice for every person, without exception, then the position which I have discussed (particular election and redemption) is false. It seems to me, too, *universalism is true*. If God’s wrath was satisfied on Christ for every person without exception, why would any have to suffer the wrath of God for themselves? This would be double jeopardy of the most severe kind. In context, we must see the flow from verses 1-6. Briefly, Paul tells Timothy to pray for “all men” defined as “kings and all who are in authority” (vv. 1 and 2); so temporally, believers may “lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity” (v. 3); because God “desires all men to be saved” (v. 4) through the “one mediator,” “Christ Jesus” (v. 5); since He is the “ransom for all” (v. 6). The intent of Paul is not to say Christ is the *actual* substitution for every person in the sense that they will “be saved” (v. 4).²⁵ He is the ransom for all *kinds* of men. He *is* the ransom for every person in the sense

that He *alone* is the “one mediator.” He is the *only ransom* for every person, but He is not the *actual ransom* for every person.

1 Timothy 4:10 For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.

The Savior in this text is the “living God.” Earlier in the passage, Paul speaks against the legalism regarding “men who forbid” that which “God has created” (v. 3). “For everything created by God is good” (v. 4). Paul encourages Timothy to hope in the Creator God who provides for all men the goodness of creation and daily sustains and delivers them—especially so for believers, since God has redeemed them. God is a Savior of unbelievers in a different sense than He is a Savior of the saved. Especially in the evangelistic context, we can say heartily God will save *all* who put their trust in Him. Though He has provided sufficiently for all men’s salvation, He *is* (effectively) the Savior of believers. He has intended from all eternity to “redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession” (Titus 2:14). He saves and delivers even unbelievers a thousand times a day. He is the only Savior there is, but He graciously provides eternal salvation for His elect.

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men.

This verse is used to object to the teaching, “God doesn’t just choose some people.” He chooses “all men.” His decree is to save all, though it’s out of His hands. God casts His vote. The devil casts his vote. Now you cast the deciding vote. In the case of Titus 2:11, we should ask what “salvation to all men” means. Is it that “all *men* are saved” to the exclusion of all women (it is a masculine noun, after all)? What a politically incorrect theology! That “every *person* is saved”? This is simply false. That “all *will* be saved” (universalism)? That the “gospel *that* saves is available to all”? This again is simply false. Think of the aborigines in Australia in 100 A.D. They had general revelation (which they suppressed in unrighteousness [Rom. 1:19–20]), but not the saving gospel. That, “all *could* be saved”? But this is no objection at all. I agree all could be saved if they believe. But the real dispute is *who will believe?* The very first verse of the book answers this— “the faith of those chosen [*eklektos*] of God” (Titus 1:1). John says those who believe in His name were born not “of the will of man, but of God” (1:13).

Paying close attention to the context of Titus 2:1–11, we would be better students to understand “all” as *all the classes of people Titus is called to pastor*. The context does not warrant “all” to mean every individual without exception. In the very verse before, we find the word “all” (Greek, *pas*), “But showing *all* good faith that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect” (2:10). Titus is to exhort “older men,” “older women,” “young women,” “young men,” “bondslaves” and show “*all* good faith” (Titus 2:2–10). God’s grace brings salvation to all of these, not abstractly as the objector supposes, but in order to teach “*us* to deny ungodliness” (v. 12). The passage continues, “Christ Jesus” “gave Himself for *us*” to “purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (vv. 13–14).

2 Pet. 2:1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.

This text is commonly used to object to *definite atonement*, particular redemption, or as it is usually called, “limited atonement.” If Christ’s death was only to redeem God’s elect, why does the text teach false teachers (to be destroyed) were “bought” by Christ in His atonement? Presumably the objector does not believe those who have been “bought” (and deny Him) will be saved, since everyone will be saved (universalism); or these individuals were once saved and now they have lost their salvation (*contra* John 5:24, 10:28–29, Rom. 8:30, and about 20 other verses). What is being suggested by the objector is Christ’s atonement paid the price of redemption for every person without exception. Hence, Christ made it possible for everyone be redeemed, but secured the redemption of no one. Admittedly, this text (2 Pet. 2:1) is difficult. Those who fail to admit this are very shallow in their reading of it. Ultimately, however, I do believe it can be pressed into the service of “unlimited atonement.” My response is, I pray, based on a careful study of the passage.

First, the term for “Master” is *despotes*. It is defined as “one who holds complete power or authority over another.”²⁶ Of the ten times this term is used in the New Testament, five of its uses refer to the *master* of slaves (1 Tim. 6:1, 6:2, 2 Tim. 2:21,²⁷ Titus 2:9, 1 Pet. 2:18), three other uses refer to God the Master, “that didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them” (Acts 4:24; see also, Luke 2:29, Rev. 6:10). The clearest parallel usage to 2 Peter 2:1 is Jude 4: “For certain persons

have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” While it seems clear enough this use (Jude 4) refers to Christ, the KJV translates it, “denying the only *Lord God*, and our Lord Jesus Christ.” Even here, the meaning and usage, as in every context, emphasizes the absolute authority and sovereignty of the Master.

Second, the passage strongly alludes to Deuteronomy 32. For example, these false teachers are called “spots” and “blemishes” (2 Pet. 2:13, as in Deut. 32:5). This “perverse and crooked generation” was bought by the Lord, as it says in 32:6, “Is not He your Father who has bought you?”

Third, the crux of the issue is the meaning of “bought” (Greek, *agorazo*). Of the thirty times it appears in the New Testament, twenty-four are simply marketplace usages (buying a field in Matt. 13:44, buying food in Luke 9:13, etc.). Aside from 2 Peter 2:1, the five other usages are strongly salvific and redemptive (1 Cor. 6:20, 7:23: “bought with a price”; Rev 5:9, 14:3, 14:4: “Thou . . . didst purchase. . . men from every tribe”). According to the lexicographers, *agorazo* means “buy,” “to acquire possessions or services”²⁸ “purchase, do business in the marketplace,” “the analogy of buying a slave’s freedom for a price paid by a benefactor redeem.”²⁹ In every New Testament use, when one “buys” (*agorazo*) something it is then “owned” or “acquired.” This point is very much at issue in 2 Peter 2:1. Those who believe Christ actually/finally redeems by His blood reprobate, false teachers are in essence saying Christ *purchased* them but does not *own* them because of the purchase—as though the price were not paid in full. Because of these three points, I would conclude: (a) these false teachers (as all who profess to know God) are *owned* by virtue of their *creation by the Master* (Deut. 32:15) and by virtue of their own *confession of the Master* (Deut. 32:1ff; 2 Pet. 2:21–22). (b) Though it is true *agorazo* is used by Paul and John to refer to the atonement of Christ, Peter prefers to use *lutroo*, “redeemed (*lutroo*) . . . with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18–19). For the objector to be correct, it must be Christ the redeemer who is “the Master” who “bought” with His blood these reprobates. It should be clear both of these essential points are quite uncertain after thorough research. I would conclude, then, Peter does not speak of the atonement of Christ in calling these apostates “bought” by the “Master,” rather, he asserts their real creature/Creator relationship to their Master (following Deut. 32), as well as their own *professed ownership* because of their apostate participation in the church (especially evident in 2:21–22).

1 John 2:2 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

Again, addressing the extent of the atonement, was it for *all without exception*? On the surface, this verse is a good objection to the sovereignty of God in the atonement, i.e., *definite or limited atonement*. The issue hangs on the meaning of “propitiation” and the sins of the “whole world” in distinction to “ours.”

First, *propitiation* (Greek, *hilasmos*) is a term that implies very strongly a *successful and effective atonement*. John says later, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (4:10). God is just in forgiving sin only because of Christ’s propitiation, which satisfied His righteousness for those justified by faith (Rom. 3:25–26). The root of this concept in the Old Testament also makes clear a *successful and effective redemption*. The very mercy-seat of the Ark of the Covenant is called a *propitiation* (Heb. 9:5). On the yearly day of atonement, the high priest sprinkled the sacrificial blood on the *mercy-seat* in the holy of holies, “to make propitiation for the sins of *the people*” (Heb. 2:17). Because of the efficacy of the propitiation, if I were going to believe in *universalism* (all will be saved), 1 John 2:2 would be the text I’d appeal to. If Christ’s blood covers and deters the wrath of God from every single person, why should any perish?³⁰

Secondly, in context, it is those who have an “Advocate with the Father,” “Jesus Christ the righteous,” that have a “propitiation” “for sins” (vv. 1–2). Just as John says Jesus is a Savior for people outside of ethnic Israel, “the world” (even Samaritans, John 4:42), Jesus *is* or *will be* a propitiation for all in the “whole world” who will believe. John says elsewhere about this propitiation, it “didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from [literally *out of*, Greek—*ek*] every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:7ff). Since John is the best interpreter of John, consider his other *us/world* contrasts (a) in the prophecy of Caiaphas, “Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (John 11:51–52). (b) Further, John records another *us/world* parallel when Jesus says, “And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock with one shepherd” (John 10:16). Though the objector has an apparent proof text in 1 John 2:1, this passage is not nearly as persuasive upon further consideration both in the specific context and in the rest of John’s writing.

So What?

Coming to the end of a study such as this, one might be inclined to ask, “So what? OK, even if it is true God completely controls all things and ordains whatever happens, how should that affect my life?” Every Scriptural teaching is profitable, including those we don’t particularly like (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Believers suffer, not only when they fail to have a right understanding of biblical doctrines, but also when they misapply those doctrines. Surely the whole discussion of the sovereignty of God is clouded by this. One would say, “OK, if God foreordains whatever comes to pass, then I don’t need to do anything, because God has foreordained what will happen—‘whatever will be, will be.’” But this is exactly how the Bible *doesn’t* apply these truths! The applications and consequences of God’s sovereignty in the Bible promote true godliness.

For example, at the end of Nebuchadnezzar’s arrogance and then utter humbling by God, he asserts God’s sovereignty. “But at the end of that period I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation” (Dan. 4:34). It is a cause for worship and for true humility, not inactivity.

Before the psalmist asserts, “God does whatever He pleases,” He says, “Not to us, O LORD, not to us, But to Thy name give glory” (Ps. 115:3, 1). The application of the psalmist is for man to be put in his place and for us to see God in His place. He is to be glorified; He is sovereign. The psalmist does not conclude God wields a cruel fatalistic design, but He is a God of loving-kindness and should receive the glory.

Jesus does not tell us of the intricate control of God over sparrows and even the very hairs of our heads (Matt. 10:29) to debilitate us from service to God. He gives us the basis of *confidence* for service. He says when you stand before “those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul” (10:28), have no fear, we have a sovereign Lord who cares for us on the most intimate and intricate level!

When the Lord told Moses He makes the “dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind” (Ex. 4:12), He does so for the sake of Moses’ assurance. The Lord Jehovah will provide what Moses needs to accomplish this mission. “Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say” (4:12). It is just because God is in complete control we can depend on Him wholly. Judging the Judge is the wrong application. Rather, we should rest in the Ruler. He is able and He is willing.

What about God's sovereign control in salvation? Knowing, "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world" should cause us to strive to "be holy and blameless before Him" (Eph 1:4). That "He predestined us to adoption as sons" should make us know and tell "the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (1:5-6). Those who reject the plain meaning of these texts say, "How could you believe God chooses some and not others? That's unfair!" "If God chooses some and not others, then why evangelize?" These kinds of responses miss what the Bible says plainly. It is, "according to the kind intention of His will," He has saved *any* (1:5). If you struggle with this, think of your own experience in the grace of God. Did turning to God come from yourself? Do you believe you embraced His mercy by your own power? Did you muster up enough repentance and faith to get yourself into the kingdom? Are you saved by your own works? Believers know in their own hearts; it was "by His doing you are in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:20).

Paul does not tell us "whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified," so Christians stop evangelizing (Rom. 8:30). He says this because if it is not the gracious, sovereign God *alone* who saves, Paul cannot say, "If God is for us, who is against us?" and "Who will bring a charge against God's elect?" and "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (8:31-33).

Ultimately there are only two choices: either one must believe in the all-controlling God of Scripture and His wise though mysterious decrees, or one must unknowingly believe in the Fate-god who is determined by chance possibilities outside himself. God is not rolling dice and hoping to pass "Go" and collect \$200. He is "the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen" (1 Tim. 6:15-16). *A God who is unable to be the sovereign controller over all things is not worthy of worship.* Our God is not the "god of the mountains," nor "a god of the valleys" (1 Kings 20:28). He is Lord over all, and His control extends to all things (Eph. 1:11). *God determines all that comes to pass for His glory and our good and therefore, we can have peace and confidence in His fatherly care of us.* Once we believe this we can resolve boldly,

Whate'er my God ordains is right! Holy His will abideth.

Endnotes

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² For more amazing information, demonstrating the sovereign care of God, see Robert Gange, *Origins and Destiny* (Waco: Word, 1986), 59.

⁴The second verse of the well-known hymn, *Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise*, by Walter Chalmers Smith, 1824–1908.

³ Written in 1563 by Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus.

⁵Randall G. Basinger's (not a "Calvinist") words are apt, "The Arminian denies that there is an exhaustive divine plan for this world. . . . As the Arminian sees it, in creating free persons God in effect created co-creators. Hence, the script of cosmic history is to an extent co-authored with his creature-creators. In a word, God's exhaustive sovereignty is denied. . . . The Calvinist sees every event as having been willed by God for a purpose," *A Case for Arminianism: The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, Clark H. Pinnock, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 191–192.

⁴A Hymn by Samuel Rodigast, 1676.

⁶Josiah Conder, 1836.

⁷The second and third verses, dated 1707.

⁸Second and third verses of this hymn by Daniel W. Whittle (1840–1901).

⁹Written in 1771 (first and fourth verse).

¹⁰The *Septuaginta*, abbreviated as the *LXX*.

¹¹A nice commentary on this is found in Norman Harper's, *Making Disciples* (Memphis: Christian Study Center, 1981), 155.

¹²This is an application point, not a full exegesis. There is more to this passage in relation to Israel's calling and failures. See my exposition and translation of Romans available on www.WordMp3.com.

¹⁴I am amazed, though, many have gone this route. One says, ". . . there are things God cannot know though omniscient, namely future free choices. . . . it cannot be said that God's knowledge is limited by his not knowing them." While another says, "God limits his power in relation to it in order to give it room to be" (*A Case for Arminianism*), p. xii.

¹⁵Published in 1982 by Christianity Today/Hope Publishing.

¹⁸*World Pictures* on verse 5, (in the Bible Works for Windows, Hermeneutika Bible Research Software).

¹⁹I prefer the translation born "from above" rather than "again" since the Greek, *anothen*, often means this and there is reference to "ascended into heaven" "descended from heaven," etc. v. 13.

²¹From the *Manual of Theology* (1857, p. 316), cited in *The Founders Journal* (19/20, Winter/Spring) (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 1995), 14.

²²See similar uses of the KJV in Acts 12:4, 17:20, and 2 John 1:12.

²³*Hebrews and The First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*, Torrance & Torrance (Eds.) (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1963), 364.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵The word for "ransom" is *antilutron*, "substitute-ransom." Especially helpful here is W.H. Hendriksen, *Exposition of I-II Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), p. 98.

²⁶*Greek-English Lexicon Based on Semantic Domains, 2nd Edition*, edited by J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida (1988) (in BWW).

²⁷This is clearly a metaphorical use, "useful to the master."

²⁸Louw-Nida, *Lexicon*.

²⁹*Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (ANLEX), Timothy and Barbara Friberg (1994) (in BWB).

³⁰Still, I pray my "unlimited atonement" friends would remain *inconsistent*, rather than assert, "logically . . . a possibility of universal salvation" (*A Case for Arminianism*, p. 45).