

MESSAGE FOR OCTOBER 3, 1999

“*QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CHARACTER OF GOD & THE GOSPEL*”

QUESTION: GOD IS IN CONTROL OF ALL THAT HAPPENS. DOESN'T THIS MAKE US ROBOTS THAT ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR CHOICES?

“If it is God who ultimately determines who is saved, then how can He hold those He has NOT chosen responsible for their sin? This cannot be fair because they had no real chance to be saved. Doesn't this reduce people to robots who move according to God's predetermined programming?” The question has many forms, but it generally comes out sounding something like that. The issue is really how the sovereignty of God relates to human responsibility. How can God hold people responsible for their sin when ultimately HE decides who is saved? The first thing to be said is that God NEVER in Scripture says that people are not saved because they were not elected. He puts the blame squarely on the person who refuses to believe. In John 5:40, Christ tells the Pharisees the reason they did not have eternal life was because “you REFUSE to come to me to have life.” Without a doubt, God holds people responsible for not believing. That must be said up front.

People are clearly responsible for the choices they make with respect to Christ. However, for the past two weeks, we have been making the case that God is in control of salvation and deciding who is saved. Now, let's briefly look at a couple of texts which indicate, NOT only that God is sovereign in salvation but that He, at one and the same time, does hold people responsible for their sinful actions. The reason we do this is to

emphasize that the Bible does indeed teach BOTH the sovereign control of God and the responsibility of humanity.

Let's look first at Luke 22:22. Jesus is celebrating the Last Supper with the disciples and is looking ahead to his crucifixion. He says, "The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him." Here you have in one verse the truths both of God's sovereign control over the death of His Son and the genuine responsibility Judas bears for his act of betrayal. We know God was sovereignly controlling the events to ensure that Jesus would go to the cross. The biblical record forces us to see that God the Father intended the death of Jesus and that intention is first revealed as far back as Genesis three. He didn't just KNOW that it would take place, He PLANNED that it would take place. The destiny of Christ was to die on the cross according to God's plan. Yet, in spite of this inescapable outcome, Jesus curses Judas for his sin. He says, "...but woe to that man who betrays him." On the one hand, we see the sovereignly controlled event of the crucifixion, but on the other, Judas is clearly held responsible for his free will choice to betray Jesus Christ and these two truths are presented alongside each other! Notice Jesus doesn't have a problem with these truths cohabiting with each other. He doesn't qualify the statement, making it easier to understand by minimizing either God's control or Judas' free will. He just lays both of them out there without apology or explanation. We see the same dynamic in the preaching of Peter at Pentecost.

In Acts 2:23, Peter is preaching and in speaking of Jesus says to the crowd, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." Once again, we see these truths stacked next to

each other. Christ went to the cross as a result of “God’s set purpose and foreknowledge.” This was God’s plan and He executed His plan. But Peter points the finger at these people for crucifying Jesus. They were held responsible for this. And we know they felt responsible for it because of what is said later. In verse 36, Peter says, “Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Here, Peter pins the crucifixion of Christ, NOT on God’s plan, but *on these people* and notice their reaction to this in verse 37, “When the people heard this [this charge of murdering the Messiah], they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”” Peter’s audience knew they were responsible for the most heinous crime in history and they are desperate to know what they could possibly do in response to this.

There was no doubt these people FELT their responsibility in crucifying Christ. They were cut to the heart by their awareness of what they had done of their own free wills. Notice, they did NOT say, “*Hey, it wasn’t our fault, Peter. You just said it was God’s plan. We didn’t have a real choice. We were just robots, mindlessly and unknowingly following God’s plan. We had no chance—it wasn’t fair—How can God blame us for this if it was part of His plan anyway?*” No. These first converts were able to accept that their human responsibility was in no way muted by God’s sovereign decree. They didn’t develop migraines trying to figure out how God could legitimately hold someone responsible for their involvement in His sovereignly controlled plan. They just accepted both truths.

There IS one text in the New Testament which DOES raise the question of how God could possibly hold someone responsible for their choices when they were part of His sovereign plan. In Romans nine, Paul brings up Pharaoh as we have seen before. God has just said that in using

Pharaoh He, at one and the same time, hardened his heart against obeying His command AND also held Him responsible for his actions. Paul summarizes God's dealings with Pharaoh in verse 18, "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden." In the next verse Paul says in response to God's dealings with Pharaoh, "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us' For who resists his will?'"

Here, unlike the case of Judas or the first converts, the question IS raised, "*How can God hold someone responsible if they are somehow part of his sovereignly decreed plan?*" They obviously did not have robots in Paul's day, but when he asks the question, "*For who resists his will?*" He is addressing the issue of robots who have no chance to resist their programming. In response to this intellectual query, Paul gives the question the kind of "deep," "nuanced," "comprehensive" response [at least in God's mind] such a question deserves. He says, "But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? 'Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this? Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?'"

The Holy Spirit's sentiment is well captured in Eugene Peterson's translation, "The Message." ²⁰Who in the world do you think you are to second-guess God? Do you for one moment suppose any of us knows enough to call God into question? Clay doesn't talk back to the fingers that mold it, saying, "Why did you shape me like this?" ²¹Isn't it obvious that a potter has a perfect right to shape one lump of clay into a vase for holding flowers and another into a pot for cooking beans? In response to this question about the fairness of God in holding people responsible in the midst

of His sovereign plan, he says in essence, *“It is arrogant to ask such a question because it assumes that you have a right to question God’s way of conducting Himself—a clay pot would never do that to its maker, why do you feel the freedom to do this to YOUR Maker?”* We must admit that this answer Paul gives here simply does not satisfy many people in an age where we have solved the mystery of sending someone to the moon and curing small pox. Paul does not intend that this answer will solve the dilemma posed by the question. What Paul says here is clear. That is, this is one question, this is one mystery, we are not even to ask about. Why not?

J.I Packer in His book *“Evangelism and The Sovereignty of God”* says the reason is because this question, when you boil it down, has to do with how God relates to Himself. What is meant by that is this. This question touches upon how God can, at one and the same time, be the King who is omnipotent and who sovereignly, absolutely controls the universe and the Judge who is perfectly just and who holds people responsible for the choices they make. How God relates to Himself as Judge when He is King and vice versa is His business. God says we have no place there. We can be fairly certain that this information, which so many wish they possessed, would be far beyond our ability to comprehend. The finite cannot apprehend the infinite.

We must remember the truth, “How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?” God says in Isaiah, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord” We must remember that God is infinite and we are finite and if, in our finiteness, we cannot solve the mystery of how the sovereign will of God in salvation and the free will of man relate to one another, that should not surprise us. This

has to do with the internal workings of God's Person and in order to understand that, we would, in some sense have to be equal with God and we are not.

God is incomprehensible. That is one of his divine attributes. The old preacher had it right, "*you cannot unscrew the inscrutable.*" Spurgeon was asked if he could reconcile these two truths with each other and he said, "*I wouldn't try, I never reconcile friends.*" In our minds, these two concepts may seem at cross purposes and require reconciliation, but in God's mind they are friends. We must never assume that every difficult issue in the Bible is a mystery, (most are NOT) but when the **Bible itself** affirms that something is beyond our understanding, it is always best to agree with the sacred text and embrace our ignorance. What is amazing is NOT that we have unanswerable questions about God and how the most complex philosophical tensions are ultimately resolved in His Person. The amazing thing is that, in His mercy, God has given us feeble minded mortals **so much** insight into His Person.

One thing is certain, we are NOT free to reject the plain reading of Romans nine in favor of an interpretation which attempts to take the mystery out of the self evident mystery. Neither are we free to interpret this text in a way which attempts to make the character of God more palatable or user-friendly to us. So many attempts to preach these hard truths about God are nothing more than attempts to shrink the Lord of the Universe into tasty, bite size pieces. Such attempts often leave us with a picture, NOT of the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, but of a defanged, declawed house cat—a pathetic and often blasphemous caricature of the Almighty. God does not need us to twist His word so as to apologize for Him or make excuses for those aspects of His personality which make the world and even segments of a self

centered church a bit squeamish. The hymn writer had it right, “*God is God and therefore King!*” When it comes to the fairness question in this context, we must remember from last week that God would be perfectly fair in not saving anyone. He is under obligation to show mercy to NO ONE.