



"Everything that God brings into our life is directed to one purpose: that we might be conformed to the image of Christ."  
—Erwin W. Lutzer

18-Jun-04

## *An Abuse of Sovereignty*

The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is [longsuffering](#) toward us, ***not willing that any should perish*** but that all should come to [repentance](#). ([II Peter 3:9](#))

The subject of God's sovereignty has sparked endless thoughts, conversations, debates, and commentary. Most professing Christians will at least agree that [God](#) is sovereign, but there is a wide range of beliefs with regard to just how involved God is in their lives. Some believe—and act—as if God wound up His Creation, set limits upon it through a set of immutable physical and moral laws, and is now sitting back to watch things progress. On the other end of spectrum, some believe in a predestination and sovereignty that relegates humanity to a collection of pawns with every move on the chessboard already planned out for them in advance. In this view, the statement that God is "not willing that any should perish" is seen as proof positive that *all* of mankind will eventually be saved.

The root word *will* in [II Peter 3:9](#) primarily means "to have a purpose," "to be minded," or "to will deliberately." The secondary meaning is "to desire." Is it God's eternal purpose that none should perish? Has He already ordained that none will be lost? Or is it only God's *desire* that none should perish, with the recognition that some will?

It should be plain that it is *at least* God's desire that none should perish. [Psalm 74:12](#) says that God is "working salvation in the midst of the earth." [II Timothy 2:4](#) likewise says that our Saviour "desires [*will[s]*] (KJV); *wishes (Amplified)*] all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." There should be no doubt that mankind's salvation is one of the things that God is working toward—though certainly not the only thing. But has God already set it in stone that *all* of mankind be saved?

If [II Peter 3:9](#) were the only scripture on the subject, the scales would be tipped in favor of this proposition. But there are a number of other scriptures that must be factored into this equation. There are innumerable verses that exhort us to be zealous and faithful in our responsibilities and obedience. Earlier in Peter's second epistle, we are told to make our calling and election sure, implying that they are *not* sure right now ([II Peter 1:10](#)). We are exhorted to work out our own salvation—with fear and trembling ([Philippians 2:12](#)). The [book of Hebrews](#) is written to stir up Christians who were slipping away and neglecting their salvation ([Hebrews 2:3](#)). Why would such an exhortation even be needed if salvation were universally assured?

Furthermore, we know that God's threat of punishment in the Lake of Fire is not an idle one—He would not warn us about it if He were not prepared to follow through ([Hebrews 10:26-31](#)). Six times in [the gospel](#) of Matthew, [Jesus Christ](#) warns of a rejection by God that involves "weeping [or wailing] and gnashing of teeth" ([Matthew 8:12](#); [13:42](#); [13:50](#); [22:13](#); [24:51](#); [25:30](#)). He gives all these warnings, even though He is still "not willing" that any should perish. But it is already recorded definitively that at least two men will *not* be saved: the Beast and the [False Prophet](#) ([Revelation 20:10](#)). It certainly is God's will—His desire—that all come to repentance, but He is not going to force it on anyone.

Human nature does not willingly accept God's sovereignty. Most people will fight tooth and nail rather than accept that they do not have complete control over their own lives. Others will accept God's sovereignty but then abuse its ramifications by diminishing their own responsibility in the sanctification process. They may believe the events of each day are already ordained ahead of time, even though the Psalmist beseeches God to "teach **us** to number **our** days [set them in order], that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" ([Psalm 90:12](#)). We are told to set the priorities of our days, rather than assuming that God will do it all for us, or assuming that, if something happens, God must have willed it. Such an approach by men unwittingly involves God in their own sins—if He has predetermined all the events in a day, He must have also "willed" each [sin](#).

Another abuse of the doctrine of the [sovereignty of God](#) comes when its application blots out the instructions that God has already recorded. Some willingly acknowledge God's

sovereignty without also paying heed to the fact that God works in set patterns. His standards are identifiable, and consequently, those individuals who are being called to salvation at this time are also readily identifiable by the conduct of their lives. It is a serious presumption to believe that because God is sovereign and **can** work through any situation that He **will** work through any situation. A prime example of this is the thought that, since God is sovereign, He can work with Sunday-keepers just as well as with Sabbath-keepers. What this line of reasoning overlooks is that God has already determined—and recorded in His Word—that the [Sabbath](#) is a vital part of His "narrow way."

Throughout the Bible, there is a tension between God's sovereignty and mankind's choice. Both factors are intricately involved in the salvation process. While God's sovereignty is categorically the stronger of the two, there is a danger when one focuses on it to the exclusion of the part we have to play. God unquestionably desires everyone to be saved, and what is more, He desires that everyone also come to be "a perfect man," according to "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" ([Ephesians 4:13](#)). He desires sons and daughters in His image, and He is working to this end. This requires tremendous effort on the part of the individual, in conjunction with everything God willingly supplies. But the choice to have a place in His Kingdom is one that He has *set* before us—not forced upon us.

- David C. Grabbe

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## *From the Archives: Featured Sermon*

### [God's Workmanship \(Part 1\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

John Ritenbaugh stresses that good works are something that take place after the process of salvation has begun. Good works are the effects of God sending forth His Spirit and deliverance, but the works are not the cause of our deliverance. God's creative effort did not end with the physical creation or our election, but God continues to work, giving His called out ones the motivation and the power to do His will (Philippians 2:13) to the end that we might exemplify His workmanship (Ephesians 2:10)- a new spiritual creation shaped and patterned after God's image, having the ethical and moral character of God.

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## *From the Archives: Featured Article*

CGG Weekly: An Abuse of Sovereignty (18-Jun-04)

**[The Sovereignty of God and Human Responsibility: Part Eleven](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

God's sovereignty and free moral agency set up a seeming paradox. John Ritenbaugh shows just how much choice we have under God's sovereign rule.

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