

# **The Sovereignty Of God And Human Responsibility: Part Eleven**

**by John W. Ritenbaugh**  
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Revelation 19:5-6 thunders a triumphant claim to all of mankind:

Then a voice came from the throne, saying, "Praise our God, all you His servants and those who fear Him, both small and great!" And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns!"

Perhaps these verses catch the essence of this series' theme better than any others do. We, of course, understand that the visible fullness of His reign has not occurred. Though He, even at this time, reigns over all, He has not chosen to reveal this fact to everyone so that they might choose to submit to Him and receive the benefits of His rule over them.

Since beginning this series, I have come to understand more things of value in areas of inspiration, encouragement, assurance and practical Christian living than at any comparable period since God called me during the late 1950s. However, I have realized from this study that, in all my years in the church, I cannot recall ever hearing or giving a sermon in which God's sovereignty was the major subject, though I have heard sermons that touched on the subject without ever claiming to be directly on it. I must conclude that this greatly neglected subject is very much needed in the church.

## **A Balanced Approach**

I do not want to be guilty of overselling this subject because to do that without also reminding us of our accountability to God would tend to produce a fatalism in us similar to the Islamic "all things will work out as they are predestined" approach to life. From what we know about the cultures of countries dominated by the Islamic concept of predestination—nations like Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia—would we rather live there or in a Western nation where at least some of the culture derives from Christianity?

On the other hand, Western cultures have virtually lost sight of God's sovereignty, and the result has been to exalt mankind at the expense of the Creator. Mankind is considered almost totally self-determining. Most doctrinal error has its roots in truth perverted, wrongly divided, or disproportionately held and taught. Put another way, a truth is isolated and becomes so magnified by a person or group that a whole movement or institution begins to revolve around and about it. It becomes a pet doctrine. In some cases, the movement becomes named after that doctrine, like Baptism, Pentecostalism, Congregationalism, Episcopalianism, Methodism, Presbyterianism and so forth.

Today, in the greater church of God, some have made such an issue of certain individual doctrines, giving the impression that unless a group has this one doctrine "right," it cannot possibly be part of the true church. Issues such as the calendar, church government, who the Elijah to come is and "love" come to mind. This practice produces the fruit of competitiveness, exclusivism, self-righteousness,

offense and division. Whatever happened to declaring "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) and seeing all these things in their proper place and proportion within the "big picture" so we can truly be in God's image and have a right relationship and fellowship with each other?

Some people are especially endowed with a beautiful or handsome face and proportioned body, but what would become of that beautiful face or body if a part of it became disproportionately large? Suppose one eye became twice as large as the other, the nose occupied the whole of the face, or one arm became as long as a leg. There would be no beauty of face and form because beauty largely consists of everything being in proper proportion to the recognized ideal. "The beauty of holiness" works the same way (Psalm 29:1-2).

In our time, special emphasis upon the supremacy of God in working out His purpose is necessary because both society and the church places so much emphasis upon other things. A preacher needs to give his hearers meat in due season, not what people might like to hear. What balances many teachings is often what we are least familiar with. Ministers tend to preach on one aspect of God without balancing their teaching with the modifying aspect.

For example, I John 1:5 says, "This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all." By way of contrast I John 4:8 says, "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love." Actually, many more aspects of God than light and love are contained within these verses, involving issues we sometimes like to avoid.

Many applications can be made of the Bible's imagery of light. Perhaps in its simplest form, it indicates truth that allows us to comprehend life in all its diversity from God's perspective. God, as light's Source, is the One who enables the called to "see" and thus submit to truth. Truth, though, is a two-edged sword, and many aspects of it are painful to those who believe (John 17:17; Hebrews 4:12).

Love is similar. At first, we often see only its pleasant and benign side. However, Romans 11:22 says, "Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God; on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off." Hebrews 12:6-7 adds, "'For whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.' If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?" God is the author of "tough love." For Him to permit His sinning children to be pampered by escaping punishment would not be love, and God would prove untrue to His nature.

Thus, for a minister to preach on only one aspect of a biblical subject to the exclusion of the balancing and modifying factors creates a caricature of God and His way. Some make grace, love, prophecy or even Christ the central issue of virtually every message, but ignore modifying factors spread throughout God's Word. This is why we must strive to gather all the Scriptures we can find on a given subject to establish correct doctrinal teaching. Otherwise, an unbalanced presentation is given. Concerning Christ, Paul writes, "[He] made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7). Conversely, Jesus says of Himself, "You call Me Teacher [Master] and Lord [Owner], and you say well, for so I am" (John 13:13). Luke 2:11 adds, "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Even as a newborn baby, He was Christ, the Lord! In fact, He was all these all of His life. To present Christ in only one facet of all He is gives a distorted view of Him and denies Him the full revelation of Himself to us that He deserves.

Notice how the Bible expands upon our responsibilities when we consult more than one scripture. Galatians 6:2 charges us with bearing one another's burdens, but three verses later Paul says, "Each one shall bear his own load." In Matthew 6:34, Jesus instructs us to take no thought for tomorrow, yet Paul tells Timothy that, "if anyone does not provide for his own, . . . he . . . is worse than an unbeliever" (I Timothy 5:8). Perhaps even more pointed is Proverbs 13:22: "A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children."

Taken alone, John 10:27-29 could give us the impression that salvation is a free, downhill ride:

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand.

However, II Peter 1:10 levels the playing field considerably in its sobering instruction: "Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble." If salvation is a free coast into the Kingdom, why does Peter admonish us to be diligent to make sure we do not fall? Paul adds that we have a responsibility to "work out [our] own salvation" (Philippians 2:12). These instructions do not contradict but complement and balance, making our responsibilities more specific and varied.

Just as it is easy to make too much of one doctrine at the expense of the whole, we are equally apt to create an imbalance between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. Each has its place; each is vital to the creation of man in God's image. God intends them to balance each other, and a child of God must understand each to make his way on this pilgrimage "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

### **God, Laws or Free Moral Agency?**

II Chronicles 20:3-6 presents an interesting proposition:

And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. So Judah gathered together to ask help from the LORD; and from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD. Then Jehoshaphat stood in the congregation of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, and said, "O LORD God of our fathers, are You not God in heaven, and do You not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations, and in Your hand is there not power and might, so that no one is able to withstand You?"

Is God really actively ruling His creation? His sovereignty over His creation is something we frequently take for granted. This presents a potentially serious problem because it results in our failing to think His sovereignty's practical aspects through to our personal situations. Thus, we greatly discount His involvement in our lives and His willingness to intervene for those who live by faith, indicating we are really living by sight (II Corinthians 5:7).

Far too many of us have unknowingly bought into the thinking of materialistic science and atheistic philosophy, which have ushered God right out of His creation by teaching that impersonal laws regulate everything. Impersonal laws exist, but they do not regulate everything. We can choose between that approach or what Jehoshaphat says in his appeal for direct intervention for Judah's

deliverance. If what is now part of Holy Scripture is not true, we may as well throw the Bible away because it cannot be trusted. God rules, not impersonal laws that merely react.

Besides overseeing the affairs of nations, the Creator and Ruler of the universe is directly and personally involved in His people's lives. He does not merely respond to those who trust Him—He creates circumstances and events, and/or He directly intervenes to make things happen. Science and atheistic philosophies have relegated God to nothing more than a distant spectator—a Being who cannot stop men from engaging in dreadful wars even though He longs to do it. Men believe that, since He has endowed humanity with free moral agency, He is obliged to let man make his own choices without interference because interfering would somehow destroy man's moral responsibility. However, this ignores God's own plan and purpose for His creation, so it cannot be a true concept.

If this were true, free moral agency, not God, is supreme. But God is ruling, not man's free moral agency! Notice these verses from just two books of the Bible:

- » I Chronicles 5:22: "Many fell dead, because the war was God's."
- » II Chronicles 11:4: "Thus says the LORD: 'You [men of Judah] shall not go up or fight against your brethren! Let every man return to his house, for this thing is from Me.'"
- » II Chronicles 24:24: "For the army of the Syrians came with a small company of men; but the LORD delivered a very great [Israelite] army into their hand, because they had forsaken the LORD God of their fathers."

This is not to say that God has brought about every war or every scattering or directly intervened to stop every threatened war that was averted during man's history. However, the Bible's record is clear: He acts when the occasion fits His will. God's direct activity regarding His purpose and plans must be considered because His Word declares that He is directly involved in the lives of His people. He makes events happen so He can form and shape His people into His image. God is not a mere spectator viewing our lives.

When we live as if God were just a spectator responding to our actions, we are guilty of irreverence, which in turn stems from a lack of faith. It is a failure to ascribe the proper dignity to His august majesty, wisdom, loving concern and power. Psalm 78:40-42 records:

How often they provoked Him in the wilderness, and grieved Him in the desert! Yes, again and again they tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember His power: the day when He redeemed them from the enemy. . . .

Provoked means "rebelled against." Their disrespect and irreverence produced the fruit of limiting His willingness and power to provide for them in any situation. In their minds, they set boundaries upon what they thought He would or could do. The psalmist does not mean they literally hogtied God to keep Him from doing things, though the practical result of their relationship virtually amounted to that. However, in their lack of faith and fear of God and their failure to make practical use of His sovereignty over His creation and His willingness to help His people, they mentally drew lines, concluding that God could not or would not provide for them in their circumstance. Thus, they chose to arrive at their own solutions that resulted in sin and death. They were obviously not living by faith but by sight.

Hebrews 4:1-2 confirms this was at the base of Israel's failure in the wilderness:

Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.

## **A Reality That We Must Learn**

Luke 6:46 poses a question that we need to answer correctly to make righteous use of our knowledge of God. Jesus asks, "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?" A powerful influence works in us to justify why we do not conform to God's way more thoroughly, despite what we know. If we must learn any lesson in all of life, it is that God is God, and His Word is sure. Virtually everything in life on this earth is under the sway of Satan, working through carnal-minded men at enmity against God. The Devil's way is designed to influence men's thinking to believe that man is supreme, while simultaneously giving lip service to God as if they know Him.

What does the Bible reveal about this? Do men not have power, knowledge and will? Of course! But what happens when they come into conflict with God's will? What happened when man tried to build the Tower of Babel? Or when Pharaoh attempted to keep Israel in slavery in Egypt? Or when Balaam sought to curse Israel? Could the Canaanites thwart Israel's invasion of the land? Did Saul manage to kill David? Could Jonah resist God's command to preach to Nineveh? Could Nebuchadnezzar execute Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? Did Herod succeed in slaying the infant Jesus?

Proverbs 19:21 says, "There are many plans in a man's heart, nevertheless the LORD's counsel—that will stand." Do we consult with God before we launch into pursuing our plans? Many times, we fail to do this because He is so far from our thinking in practical, everyday situations that we do not consider if He has any plans for us as part of His will.

Revelation 17:16-17 contains an astonishing statement of God's unseen influence in earthly events and how personally involved He is in what is planned for these end times:

And the ten horns which you saw on the beast, these will hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to fulfill His purpose, to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled.

God motivates both the destruction of the harlot by her fellow conspirators and the very drives for the union of nations into the Beast. He is working this very moment as men conspire to bring this to pass!

How could it be otherwise? If God makes prophecies about what He will do, He had better have the power to bring them to pass. He does this by influencing the thinking of those He has put into positions to fulfill them. Ezra 1:1, 5-6 clearly establishes this biblical principle:

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing. . . . Then the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the

house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem. And all those who were around them encouraged them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with precious things, besides all that was willingly offered.

This encouraging principle must be part of our everyday thinking if we are going to live confidently according to faith. If God, influenced solely by His own thinking, has decided He wants us in His Kingdom, He will move heaven and earth to form us into what He wants us to be. He has plans for us just as He had for Cyrus and Judah. Does not Jesus say, "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2)? So often, out of fear of sacrificing—fear of what it might cost to submit to Him—we make every excuse to avoid obeying Him. We justify our disobedience by saying things such as, "He really doesn't mean me"; "It won't matter this time"; "Who am I?"; "It just applies to the ministry"; or "I'm too weak."

## Two Questions

God has ways of smashing through our justifications. He will get us into His Kingdom if He has to take us through the Tribulation to accomplish it. But why do we make it hard on ourselves? This leads to two questions about God's sovereignty and human responsibility that need to be answered.

Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." In addition, Paul previously says that God has "predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:5). Peter writes, "[God is] not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (II Peter 3:9). If God, having foreordained us to be in His Kingdom, is not willing that any should perish and has thus called us, led us to repentance and given us His Spirit, why should we be careful to "maintain good works" (Titus 3:8) or "exercise [ourselves] . . . to godliness" (I Timothy 4:7)? Why is such work necessary, since God is so determined to have us in His Kingdom?

The reason is both simple and profound. It is essential we understand it because it captures the essence of these articles on sovereignty. The reason is, simply, because it is His will that we do them. We must do them or we may destroy ourselves by refusing because we thus show Him that He is not really sovereign in our life. The works, of course, have other purposes as well. In fact, they have many purposes, for God rarely creates or commands anything for which He does not have multiple uses.

It should be enough for God's children to do as He wills simply because He has bidden us. Nowhere does Scripture teach or even encourage an attitude of fatalistic indifference to our circumstance. The Bible everywhere urges us not to be content with our present spiritual state. We have a long way to go to grow to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. This is a major reason why the "welfare mentality," dragged into the church from the world, is so damaging. It destroys human responsibility to God and each other, greatly hindering one's submission to God's will. Submitting to God's will entails some measure of work because resisting human nature, Satan and ingrained habits must be overcome.

In Philippians 3:14, Paul proclaims, "I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." God has summoned us to salvation. Salvation is the prize that goes to those who yield to His will, showing by their lives that God is indeed their sovereign. Jesus admonishes us to,

"Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24). God's Word exhorts us to proceed energetically and solve the problems of life according to His instructions.

This leads to the second question. If it is God's will that we be saved and grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ, why is it so hard? If God is working with us, should this not be easy? Our first response to this is very likely, "Well, I guess it's just that I am so evil"; "It must be human nature"; or "I'm so bad God must not be hearing my prayers." Some get so weary with the difficulty that they say, "God will just have to take me as I am."

All these justifications may indeed be factors, but they are not precisely correct because most of us have some besetting sin or sins that we fail miserably to overcome time after time. Why, if it is God's will, do we not overcome them more easily?

The sin need not be easily recognizable by others, as Paul writes to Timothy that "some men's sins are clearly evident" (I Timothy 5:24). It can be a hidden sin, though we are well aware of it, know it is evil and feel constant guilt and self-condemnation because of our weakness before it.

It can be a sin of omission and not a sin of commission, in which one is directly guilty of bringing loss or pain upon another. Perhaps the failing concerns acts of kindness or mercy that we have frequently and consistently failed to do to relieve another's burden, but we know of it and are convicted of its seriousness.

This is the key to understanding why spiritual growth is so hard. Consider one's original conversion. Why did this even occur? Romans 2:4 says, "Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance." This happened only because God was revealing Himself and making us conscious of factors of life we had never before felt with that force. It moved us to repent and throw ourselves on His mercy. In reality, it was the only option He held open to us because we felt powerless to go in any other direction. Can we overcome death? The key is our awareness of powerlessness as the first essential element to spiritual growth.

In II Corinthians 12:10, Paul makes this point. "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong." In chapter 13:4, he adds emphasis to this by saying, "For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you." Just as a prerequisite to conversion is recognizing and acknowledging our utter failure in the face of sin and death, so also is a deep consciousness of our frailty required in the face of overcoming and growth in following God's way and glorifying Him.

Without this overriding sense of dependence, we will never turn to God in the first place. Without this sense of need, we will not continuously turn to Him because our passivity in this will declare that in reality, like the Laodiceans, we think we need nothing and are sufficient unto ourselves. We will be like the confident Peter, who, boasting that unlike others he would never desert Christ, immediately fell flat on his face in spiritual failure. The secret of growth in Christian character largely lies in realizing our powerlessness and acknowledging it before God.

Perhaps John 15:5 will now have more meaning. Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." It does not

mean that without Him we could never design an automobile or send a rocket to the moon. It means that we could produce nothing of a true, godly, spiritual nature within the calling of God that truly glorifies Him.

Just in case we think He is saying more than He really means, think about the following commands. Jesus says in Matthew 5:44, "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." He adds in Matthew 6:31, "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" If these are challenging, try I Corinthians 15:34: "Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame."

We have a long way to go. It is time to stop playing church—realizing that judgment is now on us—and turn to God with all our heart. He promises that, if we do this, He will hear from heaven and respond. We must constantly keep in mind that God is the Potter with the power to mold and shape as He wills. As the clay, our job is to yield, realizing even the power to submit comes from Him.

To understand this from an even broader perspective, we must consider how mankind has acted in its relationship with God beginning with Adam and Eve. They said, "God stay out of our lives. We don't need you. We will do this ourselves." Therefore, rather than choosing from the Tree of Life, they chose from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. All mankind has copied this approach down to the Laodiceans, who say they are rich and increased with goods and need nothing. It will continue even to those who will curse and blaspheme God during the final plagues in the Day of the Lord (Revelation 16:21).

### **Why Is It Still So Hard?**

But why is it so hard even when we do turn to Him? The answer is, in some ways, very simple. Everybody understands the end of the race is always harder than the beginning. This is not unusual. God even withdrew Himself from Jesus, forsaking Him totally during His final trial. God must balance the amount of help He gives us in such a way as to allow enough resistance from human nature to test us. Set up like this, the trial tests and builds our endurance, perseverance, trust in Him, hope, patience, love, sincerity, willingness to sacrifice, vision, understanding, and wisdom. The sovereign God can trust these qualities of character in any endeavor He might assign us to carry out.

Hebrews 2:10 says of Jesus Christ, "For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings." Hebrews 5:7-8 adds,

. . . who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

John 14:10 advances this concept one step further: "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works." Even as it was with Him, so it is with us.

Jesus' experience in Matthew 18:1-4 bears on this issue of God's sovereignty and human responsibility:



At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

There is God's sovereignty on one hand, in which resides all power and wisdom and from whom has come this wonderful plan by which He expresses His will and carries out His purpose to create us in His image. It is His will to do this, and nobody can frustrate Him from completing it. On the other hand, though, is the human responsibility to yield to His will, allowing Him free rein to mold and shape according to His desire and within His timeframe. In order for Him to complete His purpose in us, we must become as little children: trusting, innocent, open, wide-eyed, teachable, yielding and pliable.

Perhaps this little story will help make the point. A German girl was interviewed a number of years ago on an American radio station. Unfortunately, Germany no longer reflects the same values her story illustrates. This very accomplished young lady played the violin well and spoke four languages fluently, as well as possessing a number of other talents. The interviewer asked why she put forth the effort to accomplish all this and tried to do still more. Her answer was simple and to the point: "Because my father told me."

"Yes," he said, "but now you are twenty-one," implying, "Break loose, girl, and live a little bit!"

She replied, "In America, you have something we don't have in Germany."

"What?" he asked.

"Teenagers," she answered. "In Germany, we are children until we leave the home."

This catches the essence of God's sovereignty and human responsibility.