

The Sovereignty Of God: Part Seven

by John W. Ritenbaugh
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Acts 13:27, 48 contains an intriguing and encouraging piece of information vital to a more complete understanding of our calling:

For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning Him. . . . Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch preaching the gospel to an audience of both Jews and Gentiles. After hearing them, the Jews leave the synagogue, but the Gentiles beseech them to return the following Sabbath so they could hear more. That Sabbath virtually the whole city turns out to hear the apostles. The Jews, jealous of the response Paul and Barnabas receive, make things difficult for them by contradicting the truth to the point of blasphemy. However, the Gentiles respond yet the more.

An interesting contrast arises between verse 27, where Paul says those who did not know Christ in Jerusalem put Him to death, and verse 48, where Luke, writing after the fact, relates that those who responded to the gospel in Antioch were *appointed* to eternal life. This is important in understanding our unique position relative to the rest of humanity and in fine-tuning our relationship with each other and most importantly with God.

Appointed is translated "ordained" in the King James Version. However, almost all modern versions render it "appointed." It also means to set, dispose, incline, devote, designate, institute, resolve, arrange and even addict. The word *never* indicates an internal disposition or inclination arising within oneself, but *always* contains the notion of an ordering, arranging, setting or appointing from without, that is, from a source other than the individual himself. In this case, Luke implies that the Gentiles who responded to Paul and Barnabas' preaching were inclined or disposed to believe the gospel and embrace eternal life by God through His Holy Spirit. In other words, their faith was not self-generated.

This explains, at least in part, why those in Jerusalem did not know Jesus. If God did not dispose them to know Him, they were operating entirely from their own minds dominated by human nature and very unlikely to recognize Jesus as Lord and Savior. Because God did not incline them to believe, Jesus appeared to them nothing like what He truly was. They most commonly judged Him as a mere man from Nazareth, a religious competitor and pretender to the throne of David. Though He was popular with the people, they could easily brush Him aside and condemn Him to death for blasphemy.

God's Summons

Commentaries sometimes say Acts 13:48 is controversial because it indicates predestination, but a measure of predestination is clearly involved in our calling! Paul writes in Ephesians 1:5, "[God] predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will." He is equally expressive in Romans 8:29-30:

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

If we believe in justification and glorification, is there not also equal evidence for predestination? This does not mean that every act of a person's life is predestined, but that God predestines some to be summoned to salvation while not calling others. Do not the words "call," "invite," or the even stronger "summon" indicate separating one from several or many?

We can all relate to this simple illustration: If a child is playing outside with some other children, and his parent goes out to call or summon him, though the other children may hear the parent's voice, is not that calling specifically for his child? Does it not separate him from the group? Is not the child's mind disposed or inclined to respond to his parent's call? The other children may hear the call, but they do not respond in the same way because the summons is specific to the particular child.

When a parent calls his child, he does not do it without purpose; he calls the child for a specific reason. As the child responds and separates from the group, the parent begins to reveal to him why he was called: "Go wash your hands—we are going to eat dinner"; "Get ready for bed"; "Run this errand for me"; "Clean up your room"; or "I just wanted to see that you were all right."

In principle, this is similar to God's calling of us except for the purpose. By His Spirit He supernaturally disposes our minds through His summons and begins to separate us from those He is not calling. At the same time, He begins to reveal Himself and His way. He does not call everybody generally, just as the human parent predetermines which child he wants to call. Thus our calling is completely within the will of the sovereign God, who specifically appoints those He desires to understand at this time.

Our Calling and Human Nature

God must predispose us to respond because we are so deceived about what to look for that we would never find Him. In addition, we are so busy doing our own thing, like a child playing around, that we do not even care. Even though He reveals Himself, it still takes us a long time to come to know Him because we carry so many false concepts, and like children, we have short attention spans and are easily distracted.

One reason this is controversial, especially among the more naturally religious, is that human nature does not take pleasure in being humbled. It avoids admitting that salvation is far more an act of God than earned through our intelligence, goodness, wisdom, morality, purity, conviction, commitment to prayer and study, dedication to seeking Him, or love of God. Human nature is so perverse that even in this, in the face of so much biblical evidence, vanity wants to take credit for what it simply does not deserve.

Paul says in Romans 3:27-28: "Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law." He adds in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Even the faith that starts us on the road to repentance and justification is God's gift!

Consider man's position in relation to the sovereign God in the example of Israel. God chose the Israelites as His covenant people, freed them from Egypt, and guided them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Israel did not choose God, God chose Israel. They were helpless in their pitiful slavery to their Egyptian taskmasters. *God* destroyed the economy of Egypt. *He* broke the will of their captors. *He* crushed their military power. *He* divided the Red Sea. *He* gave them food and water in the wilderness. *He* led them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Israel made it to the Promised Land only because of what God did. Had Israel not had God working for them, the best they could have done is dream of what God accomplished and complain because of their miserable state in slavery. They would never have thrown off their bondage, let alone succeed in reaching the type of the Kingdom of God.

This principle of how God operates is no different from what He is doing with us spiritually. We can easily see through this analogy that Israel reached the Promised Land only through God's sovereign acts of grace.

God's Sovereignty and Predestination

Does God have every act of every person's life already planned out in advance? Is everything already predetermined so that we are completely subject to fate? If this were so, could free moral agency exist? Why, then, would we need faith? What need would we have of prayer? If this were true, we would be nothing more than puppets on a string! Israel's trek through the wilderness proves that human nature resists God. He records Israel's choices as a group as well as certain individuals' choices, and the simple fact that they made choices shows that God has not predetermined our fate.

The apostle Peter writes, "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). He does not say that some will not perish; He only says what His will is. However, there is a Lake of Fire, and clearly, some will be burned up in it (Revelation 19:20; 20:15).

Hebrews 4:1-2 says about Israel 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.

God willed that they possess the land of Canaan as He had promised the patriarchs. However, many of the people chose to die in the wilderness through disobedience. They did not have to die there. They chose to sin with the Golden Calf, to complain bitterly, to rebel with Korah, to commit fornication with the daughters of Moab, and so on. The Bible never indicates that God predestined they do these things and die before reaching the Promised Land.

On the contrary, Numbers 14 shows that He wanted them to be in the Promised Land by the end of the second year. But because of their lack of faith and the resulting fear of the Canaanites, they chose not to enter it, so God switched to "Plan B." They condemned themselves to wander 40 years. An entire generation—those over 20 who left Egypt, the fearful and rebellious, those too deeply impressed with the nature of Egypt—left their bodies strewn across the wilderness.

If God permits something, we should not automatically assume that He predestined it from the foundation of the world. The Bible does not support such a view. At best, it only indicates He decides to use such a circumstance for His purpose, perhaps to see what we will do with it.

Recall the analogy of calling a child out of a group of children. When we do so, we have a specific reason in mind, say, for him to put his room in order. This is what we predestine for him to do; it is our will that he complete this assignment. We do not predestine every step in putting the room in order, but we want him to finish the task to a level that satisfies us.

While doing the job, he might just dawdle along or be distracted by the radio or TV. He might decide to play with a toy for a while or amuse himself with a game or book. He may work in spurts, hurriedly throwing everything unfolded in a drawer or piling clothing or games into a messy closet. Meanwhile, he may totally forget to make the bed, dust the furniture or vacuum the floor. He may become so preoccupied with some distraction that he will not work unless we supervise him. We may have to step in occasionally to urge him back to work. We may be subjected to a great deal of murmuring about how unfair we are, how tired he is or how little we have provided for him.

We did not predetermine every move. As an overseeing parent, we check on him from time to time, letting him know this is acceptable and that is not. We teach him our standards: to fold and arrange things neatly, to put everything in its place, to bring order and tranquillity out of confusion and stress. We have predestined and willed an end, a goal we want produced. But how it is accomplished largely depends on how the child responds to each step along the way. The quality of the response hinges largely on the quality of the relationship between parent and child.

This illustration is a greatly simplified analogy of what is a long process in our relationship with God in the outworking of His purpose. But it closely parallels the overall working principles of sovereignty, calling, will, predestination and choice within this relationship.

Philippians 2:12-15 admonishes us on what God expects of us as the child in our relationship with Him.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without murmuring and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

It is important for us to understand that "work out your salvation" does not mean work *for* salvation. It means we must take what God has given us to its logical conclusion. God liberated Israel from

Egyptian slavery, but His purpose was not complete until they trekked across the wilderness and possessed the Promised Land. Their liberty came as an act of God's grace, but that same grace required them to meet responsibilities and carry them to their conclusion.

Philippians 2:13 explains that God's grace did not end at the borders of Egypt for them, nor does it end for us once we are justified. He gives us both the motivation and the power to accomplish what His pleasure is for us. But we should understand that He gives us the desire and power to accomplish *His* will, not our pleasures. This is an excellent principle for parents to apply in motivating their children to respond positively. Children are largely the creations of their parents. If parents expect their children to reach certain goals, they must equip them with the attitudes, skills and tools necessary to accomplish those aims.

"Fear and trembling" indicates both a deep respect for the Almighty who has called us, as well as a healthy measure of concern for uncertainties about what will be required of us as we proceed along this way. As we spiritually mature, the trials we must work through generally become more difficult, not easier. When the Philippians took up their cross, they did not know for sure what lay ahead, nor do we. For them, it was conflict (1:29-30); for Jesus, death (2:8); for Paul, martyrdom (2:17); for Timothy, costly sacrificial service to the church (2:20); and for Epaphroditus, physical illness nearly to death (2:27).

Of course, these things are far more serious than a child's responsibility to put his room in order, but we must consider if God is fair in His dealings with man. Is a parent fair in charging his children with responsibilities to carry out around the house?

Sovereignty and Faith

Paul broaches this as a practical theological question in Romans 9:19-24:

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

The book of Job deals with this question in much more detail. Job, who felt misunderstood by his friends and unfairly treated by God, seems to imply it in every statement and question. Like us, Job was a creation, a son of God and a slave all at once. Elements of human nature remained in him, and he had a rather large gap in his understanding of God's nature and rights and his position in the relationship. Job experienced this for our understanding, as well as for his own completion as a son of God.

Beyond merely deciding whether he, the creation, son and slave, would obey what God established as law, he also had to learn that God has every right to require of him whatever He pleases. Since His very nature is love, whatever He required of Job would always be in the best interest not only of God's overall purpose, but also His purpose for Job himself.

Who is the sovereign and who is the slave is a point Paul is making in Romans 9. Understanding and translating it into loving submission to Him is essential to our relationship with God. This is frequently very difficult because it often requires a great deal of faith. Around Job swirled events he could not see, involving Satan's direct participation. Job could not walk by sight and come to correct conclusions and make right choices. The story shows, however, that Job had faith even though he lacked some understanding. God patiently brought him through the trial, as He does for us.

Whether our faith will ever be practical in translating mere knowledge of God and His purpose into everyday use hinges on three major factors:

1. That we absolutely recognize the true God of the Bible as sovereign over His creation.
2. That we believe and accept that Jesus Christ is the payment for our sins. Therefore, because the Father owns us in a Master/slave relationship, He has every right to do with us as He pleases.
3. That we believe that through His calling He has predestined us to eternal life, demonstrating that He is personally concerned for us and working in us and through us individually.

Romans 11:28-29 is interesting in this regard. "Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." This applies to the church just as surely as it does Israel, but each in his own order. God not only calls, He provides gifts to enable us to trust Him to carry out His will. One of the gifts God gives is faith so that we can say, "Yes, Lord." He promises in I Corinthians 10:13 never to test us above what we are able, so we have no excuse to say we cannot do it. We can overcome!

Acts 18:27 appears in a context reporting some of Apollos' activities, but it bears on this subject: "And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace." The last phrase, "who had believed through grace," parallels the thought in Acts 13:48: "And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed." It reinforces that our belief is the consequence, not the cause, of God calling us, even as His predestinating us to eternal life causes us to believe. This also clarifies that God appoints only a limited number to eternal life, and by grace, God's gift, He imparts to them the faith to submit to Him. Some believed the preaching of Paul and some did not. Those whom God gave faith by grace were greatly helped by Apollos, to whom God had also given faith.

Ephesians 2:3 makes it clear we all begin on the road to God's Kingdom from nearly the same spiritual base. "We all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others." Romans 9:21 confirms this: "Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?" It is completely the sovereign God's choice whom He assigns to have the faith to be saved. Those He assigns to have faith, He calls. We have nothing to brag about before God or man regarding our position.

God's Sovereignty, the Lowly and Love

Within God's purpose, things of consequence to that purpose do not happen by accident. Notice Romans 11:2-5:

God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, "LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life"? But what does the divine response say to him? "I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.

What is important to us here is the principle Paul extracts from the incident. The words "even so then" draw our attention to God's calling and election.

In Elijah's day, Israel was almost totally idolatrous. He challenged Israel, saying "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but Baal, then follow him" (I Kings 18: 21). He contested the 450 priests of Baal, and he counted Jezebel, Israel's queen, as a personal enemy. Elijah became discouraged, feeling totally alone in fighting these battles. To encourage him, God tells him He had divinely preserved seven thousand men from idolatry, bringing them to the knowledge of the true God. He had done this, not because they were special, but solely by His influence and agency. Elijah was not even aware of them!

In like manner—even so—there is today a remnant according to the election of grace that God has reserved for Himself, not because they are special, but solely by His influence and agency. There is no indication anywhere that God chose us because we already had faith or any other redeeming quality that forced His hand to call us.

I Corinthians 1:26-29, a New Testament parallel of Deuteronomy 7:7, removes any doubt about the qualifications of those God has chosen to call:

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.

Twice in verse 27 and once in verse 28 Paul says, "God has chosen." We did not volunteer. He did not choose us for any skill, ability or social quality we had. Even those who are "wise," "mighty" and "noble" are not that way through godly spirituality.

Instead, God, with deliberate forethought, chose those who were foolish, base, despised and nothing. What a rag-tag outfit we are! God certainly has not surrounded Himself with the elite to give Himself an advantage in His battle against Satan! He has given Himself, it seems, a great disadvantage in dealing with us when better people may be readily available.

In John 17:3, Jesus describes eternal life as knowing God. "Know" does not indicate a mere casual familiarity, but a very close relationship approaching the intimacy of a sexual one. That is how we must relate to Him.

There are other verses that show that God "knows" us:

- » I Corinthians 8:3: "But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him."
- » Galatians 4:9: "But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?"
- » Amos 3:2: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." Though God says this to Israel, it applies even more intimately to the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16).

These verses again show a vital key to understanding our relationship with Him: Our love for Him is merely a response to His initiative.

By way of contrast, compare these to what Jesus says to those who are not called as their disobedience shows, but who masquerade as disciples, even as ministers, as if they really knew the Father and Son:

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" (Matthew 7: 21-23)

Since He never knew them, is this not just another way of saying, "I never loved you"?

We are who we are, the foolish and weak of the world. We believe because God has appointed us to eternal life. We have faith because of His grace, and the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts because the Father loves us. If we understand the Scriptures correctly, God has chosen the most unlikely people upon which to pour out His grace and love and so become holy and without blame before Him.

Appointed to Death?

Now consider I Peter 2:7-10:

Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone," and "A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense." They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed. But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

Does this mean that some people are appointed to stumbling? If this were all we had, we could make a strong case that God has predestined some to be eternally lost in the Lake of Fire. It means that those who now stumble have simply been passed over *at this time*. God has appointed them to fill a different part in His scheme of things, and they will not have the same opportunity we now enjoy until the time He has set for them.

Does not Revelation 20:5-6, 11-13 reveal a second resurrection? Does not II Peter 3:9 say God is "not willing that any should perish," and I Corinthians 15:23, that each will be resurrected "in his

own order"? A myriad of scriptures reveals this is not the only day of salvation. Portions of Ezekiel 37, Zechariah 14, Matthew 11-12, Isaiah 2, Micah 4 and Romans 11 all reveal a coming resurrection of the dead when those resurrected will be offered salvation.

But what we must truly know now, in our time of salvation (I Peter 4:17), is that no cause apart from God's will moved Him to make us the special object of His love. We must be careful to believe this fully because human nature always looks for some trait within us that motivated God to call us. Human nature always seeks to make itself look good. It will move us to think, even to say, "I have always loved God." Yet how can human nature honestly say this when we must repent before a relationship with Him can even begin? We repent of sin, the breaking of God's law, and love is the keeping of God's law. If we were really keeping God's law—that is, loving Him—then we would have no need to repent.

I Peter 1:18 clarifies this love: "You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers." Before repentance, our "love" for God was like what the uncalled in the world have for Him to this day. We loved a concept of God given us by tradition. We even had some part in devising it because we really did not know Him. If we acknowledge this reality, we will discover it was an *idol*! In principle, it was tantamount to bowing before a statue as the ancient pagans did. Those in the world cannot enter His Kingdom until they worship the true God, which is why the second resurrection is necessary. It is also why God says in such verses as Ezekiel 37:6, "I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the Lord."

The God of the Bible says in His Word that not a single person has ever known Him until He chose to reveal himself because before this happens no one knows what to look for in God. Both testaments say, "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God" (Romans 3:10-11; Psalm 14:1-3).

Human nature likes to think of itself as possessing certain virtues—that we were generous, kind, good-tempered, sincere, etc.—and that God saw these in us and chose us for His side. How can this be in light of these scriptures? Who is telling the truth? Though some do have virtuous qualities, God does not call such people because of them. Besides, these qualities fall far short of the image into which God is shaping us.

Some people like to say they have always believed God, yet what they believed was an idol, a syncretistic god devised by combining biblical truth and paganism. If what they say were true, Acts 18:27 could not also be true. We believe because faith is God's gift. We have what we have only because we are the objects of His choice. He chose the ones He did simply because He chose them. We can go no further. We have no claim to any praise in this regard. Instead, it should humble us, stun us, into overflowing praise, gratitude, obedience and zeal that He has given so much to those so undeserving to receive it.

Humility begins when we properly recognize who and what we are in relation to the sovereign Creator and to fellow man, called and uncalled alike. We show humility by the choices we make, and these will largely be determined by our willing recognition of the immense value of God's loving revelation of Himself to us.