

RANDY ALCORN

Author of If God Is Good

handⁱⁿ HAND

The Beauty of
God's Sovereignty
and Meaningful
Human Choice



handⁱⁿ
HAND

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ALCORN

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and Meaningful Human Choice



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HAND IN HAND

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To

Julia Stager

*Not only for your fine work producing the
charts and diagrams I envisioned,
but for your theological insights and
contributions which I so value.*

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Why Is This Tough and Controversial Issue Worth Discussing?

Let those who are wise understand these things.

Let those with discernment listen carefully.

The paths of the LORD are true and right,
and righteous people live by walking in them.
But in those paths sinners stumble and fall.

Hosea 14:9, NLT

Let us arouse ourselves to the sternest fidelity,
laboring to win souls as much as if it all depended
wholly upon ourselves, while we fall back in faith
upon the glorious fact that everything rests with
the eternal God.

Charles Spurgeon

What difference does it make?
What good can come from studying the mysterious and some-
times upsetting subject of God's sovereignty and human free will?

In small-group Bible studies, at colleges and seminaries, on blogs and

radio programs, sovereignty and free will are bantered about. Some recognize these issues as hugely important. Convinced of their position, they look for opportunities to make their case.

Others shrug and say, “These doctrines cause division and are impossible to understand. Why even try?”

I believe one compelling reason to study them is to *better* understand what we cannot *fully* understand. And in the case of God’s sovereignty and human choice, while it’s not imperative that I understand everything, it *is* important that I believe in both. If I don’t believe in God’s sovereignty, I’ll either despair or imagine that I must carve out my own path. If I don’t believe in my freedom to make meaningful choices, I’ll either give up on life or not take responsibility for my decisions.

Following are six other excellent reasons:

1. To develop a deeper appreciation for God and his Word, which reveals him to us.

When the United States announced its intention to send a man to the moon, it mobilized untold resources. By the time Neil Armstrong set foot on the lunar surface in July 1969, the US space program had done much more than reach its objective. Along the way, great advances were made in medicine, engineering, chemistry, physics, and numerous other fields. NASA aimed at the moon and got a whole lot more.

Likewise, our pursuit of godly wisdom and understanding will not only deepen our perspective on a specific passage or topic, but also help us in countless other ways, as we give extra effort to diligently and prayerfully meditate on God’s Word (see Psalms 19:8; 119:30, 105; 2 Peter 1:19). By the time you finish this book, I hope you’ll have learned about God’s sovereignty and our choices and a lot more too.

2. To help us mirror Christ’s humility.

True humility and wisdom consist of recognizing how little we really know. The Bible insists we “know in part” and we “see but a poor reflection as in a mirror” (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12).

However, God is honored when we go to his Word to learn more

about him and his ways. We're to bow to the wisdom of Scripture, even when its mysteries are hard to wrap our minds around. Humility requires that we not think more highly of ourselves than we ought (see Romans 12:3) and that we realize how much we have to learn from God.

When the Ethiopian eunuch was puzzling over Scripture, Philip asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (Acts 8:30). Asking God to enlighten us and give us insight from his Word will go a long way toward benefiting from this study.

True humility and wisdom consist of recognizing how little we really know.



Bible study is exciting when we come expecting to learn, to be challenged, and to be transformed. If you aren't open to adjusting your opinions when they don't align with Scripture, this book is not for you.

3. To embrace all of God's inspired Word, not just parts of it.

"The first to present his case seems right," says Proverbs 18:17, "till another comes forward and questions him." Our families and churches and the books we've read may have presented their cases first, but that doesn't mean they are right.

The Message paraphrases Ecclesiastes 7:18: "It's best to stay in touch with both sides of an issue. A person who fears God deals responsibly with all of reality, not just a piece of it." God inspired *all* of his Word, not just parts of it, and he calls us to embrace it all. My desire in this book is to mine from God's Word "all of reality, not just a piece of it."

We should compare Scripture with Scripture to discern the whole counsel of God.

Large dogs can get two tennis balls in their mouths at the same time. Not our Dalmatian, Moses. He managed to get two in his mouth only momentarily. To his distress, one ball or the other always spurted out. Likewise, we have a hard time handling parallel ideas such as grace *and*

truth, or God's sovereignty *and* free or meaningful choice. We need to stretch our undersized minds to hold them both at once.

A paradox is an apparent contradiction, not an actual one. Sovereignty and meaningful choice aren't contradictory. God has no trouble understanding how they work together. In his infinite mind they coexist in perfect harmony.

As you may have noticed, however, *our* minds are not infinite. And while our brains can never fully grasp sovereignty and meaningful choice, by affirming what Scripture says about both, we can avoid the mistake of denying one in order to affirm the other.

A paradox is an apparent contradiction,
not an actual one.



4. To foster unity in the body of Christ.

I bring to this book a respect for brothers and sisters in Christ who believe God's Word but understand it differently than I do. I encourage you to carefully examine your own positions and inconsistencies before subjecting fellow Christians to blistering critique. Puritan Thomas Brooks stated, "There are no souls in the world that are so fearful to judge others as those that do most judge themselves, nor so careful to make a righteous judgment of men or things as those that are most careful to judge themselves."¹

Let's bear the fruit of the Spirit, which includes both peace and patience (see Galatians 5:22). Unity has an evangelistic power that needless division undermines (see John 17:20–21). When we seek to become peacemakers among Christ-following Bible believers, we please Jesus (see Matthew 5:9).

Let's recognize our core areas of agreement, making an honest attempt to *understand* one another while refusing to let peripheral issues separate us. If we love the same Jesus and believe the same Bible, let's start and end there.

5. To avoid both fatalism and crushing guilt.

Church history shows us that leaning heavily toward a particular set of verses can result in apathy and passivity: “God is going to do whatever he wants to do anyway, so why bother doing anything ourselves?” Leaning heavily toward another set of verses can result in something close to frenzy and unrelenting guilt: “We have to save the world! It all depends on us!”

What is God’s role and what is mine? Is my life in God’s hands, my hands, or the hands of demons or other people? What we believe about God’s sovereignty and human choice has a significant impact on how we live.

6. To prevent us from becoming trivial people in a shallow age.

The times we live in are in no danger of going down in history as “The Era of Deep Thought.” In our world, feelings overshadow thinking, and sizzle triumphs over substance.

Taking their cues from the culture, Christians who hear about the paradox of sovereignty and free will might say, “It’s a mystery; we’re never going to solve it.” But this can just be laziness, a spiritual-sounding way of saying, “I don’t want to think too hard. Let’s watch a movie instead.”

How can we keep the shallowness of our culture from turning us into trivial Christians? “Reflect on what I am saying,” Paul wrote, “for the Lord will give you insight into all this” (2 Timothy 2:7).

Though surrounded with sweeping superficiality and slavery to what’s trending on Twitter, we must learn to think deeply. Paul warned, “The time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (2 Timothy 4:3–4, NIV 2011).

If you want truth and depth, you have to spend time in God’s Word, allowing it to make the crucial sixteen-inch journey from your head to your heart. Yes, the question of how human choice and divine sovereignty

can coexist is big and difficult, but it's also vitally important. If we devote our lives to dealing only with trivial issues, we can't help but become trivial people.

The relationship of God's sovereignty and our meaningful choice is both intriguing and beautiful.

Of all the dilemmas we confront in life, none is more befuddling than God's sovereignty and human choice. So why do I find the perplexing question of God's sovereignty and human choice beautiful rather than frustrating?

It all depends on perspective.

You don't have to be able to wrap your mind around something in order to see its beauty.



When astronomers gaze into deep space they're confronted with the universe's puzzles. One of them is dark energy, which is "thought to be the enigmatic force that is pulling the cosmos apart at ever-increasing speeds." How and why is it doing this? Another unknown is how dark matter, "thought to make up about 23 percent of the universe," somehow has "mass but cannot be seen"; its existence is deduced by the "gravitational pull it exerts on regular matter." What exactly is it?

Cosmic rays are highly energetic particles that flow into our solar system from deep in outer space, but where do they actually come from? It's been a mystery for fifty years. The sun's corona, its ultrahot outer atmosphere, has a temperature of "a staggering 10.8 million degrees Fahrenheit." Solar physicists still don't understand how the sun reheats itself.²

These mysteries and countless others have not so much frustrated scientists as fascinated them. Watch their interviews and read their articles; their wonder about things they don't comprehend is palpable. You don't have to be able to wrap your mind around something in order to see its beauty.

This is how I view the conundrum of God remaining sovereign while still granting his creatures the gift of choice. The immensity of the marvel itself should move God's children to worship.

Human beings are capable of inventing nonliving machines, including computers they program to do complex tasks. But God goes far beyond that by creating complex beings with choice-making capacity, including the freedom to worship or revolt.

For God to fully know in advance what billions of human beings could and would do under certain circumstances, and to govern our world in such a way as to accomplish his eternal plan—is this not stunning?

If we can gaze at the night sky or a waterfall or the ocean with hearts moved at their sheer beauty, should we not be able to study the metaphysical wonders of God's universe with equal or even greater awe?

Surely our lives are greatly enriched when we recognize the mysterious beauty of the interplay between God's ways and ours.

God's choices come first, and ours second.

Throughout this book, I'll discuss both choice and sovereignty in ways that may frustrate you if you're accustomed to affirming one at the expense of the other. I may irritate you by sometimes making what I believe seem obvious, and at other times raising questions that challenge all positions, including my own. To try to tie everything together neatly wouldn't do justice to the complexity of these difficult issues.

I do think it's reasonable to look at God's choices as being more foundational than our own. Why? Because we're made in his image, and his choice-making precedes and empowers ours. The universe is first and foremost about the purposes, plan, and glory of God. Because he is infinite, his choices naturally hold more sway than those of his creatures. As his power exceeds ours, so does the power of his choices.

That doesn't mean our choices don't matter—they certainly do. He gives us room to make choices according to the prevailing disposition of our will and within the limits he imposes in his sovereign plan. My perspective is simply that everything about God, including his choices, is greater than everything about us.

A. W. Tozer said, “Every soul belongs to God and exists by His pleasure. God being Who and What He is, and we being who and what we are, the only thinkable relation between us is one of full lordship on His part and complete submission on ours.”³

That’s the spirit in which I’m approaching this book: eager to acknowledge his lordship and willing to submit to whatever he has revealed in his Word. I invite you to join me in exploring this fascinating topic... and experiencing the joy of discovery.

Notes

The opening epigraph is from C. H. Spurgeon, in George Carter Needham, *The Life and Labors of Charles H. Spurgeon* (Boston: D. L. Guernsey, 1883), 12.

1. Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010), 154.
2. Space.com Staff, “8 Baffling Astronomy Mysteries,” April 3, 2013, numbers 8, 7, and 1, www.space.com/15936-astronomy-mysteries-science-countdown.html.
3. A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Rockville, MD: Serenity, 2009), 89.



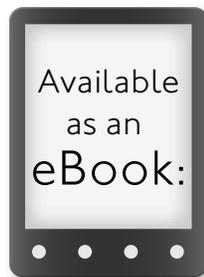
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