

DOES GOD REALLY RULE THE UNIVERSE?

An exposition of Isaiah 46:9-11

By Andrew AUCAMP



HILLCREST
BAPTIST CHURCH
Where Truth Matters

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Let's face it, we think we rule!

If we have to listen to the many motivational talks in the world today, the following phrases are common:

- You can be anything you want to be!
- Create your own future!
- Your destiny is in your own hands!

Yet, anyone who is honest, and thinks deeply about these phrases, must realise that something is wrong with them. We often experience frustration. Our plans often do not turn out the way we want them to. Some people experience success, but this is often short lived. Can we really be and do everything we want to? Is our destiny really and ultimately in our hands?

Random events take us by complete surprise, and can change the course of our lives in a second. Is there a blind fate that controls all these events? Is anyone in control of the world? We certainly are not.

Where do find answers to these important questions?

The Bible speaks very clearly about who rules the universe. It says some amazing things about God, and His sovereign rule. This booklet sets out what the Bible teaches about God's rule over the universe.

Two important concepts from the Bible

Isaiah 46:9-11 introduces two very important concepts to understand the subject of God's sovereignty.

⁸ *"Remember this, and be assured;
Recall it to mind, you transgressors.*
⁹ *"Remember the former things long past,
For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is no one like Me,
¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning,
And from ancient times things which have not been done,
Saying, 'My purpose will be established,
And I will accomplish all My good pleasure';
¹¹ Calling a bird of prey from the east,
The man of My purpose from a far country.
Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass.
I have planned it, surely I will do it. (Isa. 46:9-11)*

Firstly, we are told by God Himself that He has a "purpose" for the future. On the basis of this purpose of His, He declares what will happen. Very importantly, this purpose is described as His "pleasure," a word which conveys the very strong idea that God's "purpose" is not thrust upon Him in any way, but it is actually what He truly wants to happen.

Theologians label this aspect of God's sovereign rule as His decree. Simply put, God's decree equates to His plan or purpose for the future, and as we will see later, His plan for all of history. He declares what will come to pass on the basis on what He has planned and decreed to come to pass.

Secondly, we are told that God will actually bring this plan or purpose of His to pass. He will be active in ensuring that His pleasure will be realised. This activity of God is called His providence. He works in history to accomplish His plan.

If you re-read Isaiah 46:9-11, you will notice that there is a very close connection between God's decree and God's providence. God *brings to pass* what He *planned* to happen. In other words, His *providence* is based on His

decree. This means that God never acts in history in an arbitrary fashion, or merely as a response to human activity or events in the world. Rather, God is actively bringing His plans and purposes to pass.

This should not surprise us. Man, in the image of God, also makes plans, and seeks to bring his plans to pass. In fact, we hardly do anything without first planning (however informal or brief the planning may be). All of our basic activities, such as getting married, going on a holiday, or pursuing a career require some form of planning. After the plan has been finalised, we then start to act to bring the plan to pass. Due to our very real limitations, we have different degrees of success in bringing these plans to pass. Nevertheless, we still display some of God's sovereignty as divine image bearers in that we plan, and act on those plans.

Some important questions arise as we consider these two aspects of God's sovereignty. These questions will be used to understand God's sovereignty in more detail.

Does God control everything in the world?

We may be tempted to try and guess as to what God's decree and providence extends to. Does God's plan, and His execution of that plan, extend to only the big or significant events in history? Is He just concerned with the decisions and actions of influential men and women, such as the chief executive officers and state presidents of the world? Or is He mainly concerned with the events in history that have a spiritual bearing on His people? As much as some of these ideas may initially seem appealing, deep thinkers will realise that they don't make much sense. For one thing, very small, seemingly insignificant, events have inspired people to achieve great things. There is simply no way to differentiate between a "small" or a "great" event. Also, seemingly insignificant people have risen to great positions of power, and their lives in obscurity have shaped them into the leaders they became. There is simply no way of differentiating between "great" and "ordinary" men and women.

We have to turn to the Bible to answer these types of questions. Isaiah 46:10 tells us that God declares “the end from the beginning” (a rather sweeping statement that one is tempted, at face value, to take as “all of history”) and “from ancient times things that are not yet done.” Verse 11 introduces specific events and a person that God’s decree and providence extended to, namely Cyrus, and his subsequent activities that brought about God’s plans.

From the rest of Scripture, we can build up a rather comprehensive picture of what these “things” extend to.

God controls the destiny of nations and kings:

*It is He who changes the times and the epochs;
He removes kings and establishes kings;
He gives wisdom to wise men
And knowledge to men of understanding. (Dan. 2:21)*

He controls the small, seemingly random events that occur all around us every day:

*The lot is cast into the lap,
But its every decision is from the Lord. (Prov. 16:33)*

Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.³⁰ But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows. (Matt. 20:29-30)

Psalm 104 is fascinating in its depiction of God’s active control over nature. He causes the grass to grow (vs 14), and delivers prey to the lions (vs 21). The animal’s fullness or deprivation is as a direct result of God opening or closing His hands (vs 27-29). This is not the language of a God who created the world and set it in motion like a clock, and then stood back and watched what would happen according to the laws of nature. This is a God who is actively in control of all that happens in nature.

God is even in control of sinful actions. Acts 4:27-28 clearly depicts the sinful actions of men as being part of God’s decree.

For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur. (Acts 4:27-28)

God decreed these events to take place, and brought them to pass. As another example of this, God hardened Pharaoh in his sin in order to glorify His name and power (Rom. 9:17-18). God's sovereign relationship to sin is complex, and it is beyond the scope of this booklet to deal with all the considerations. However, the Bible is clear that God does decree and control sinful events without diminishing the responsibility of the person who sins. A little more will be said about this later.

God also decrees and controls those who will be saved. Ephesians 1:3-8 very clearly teaches that God chose certain people before the foundation of the earth to be saved. These people were predestined to be adopted as sons.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love ⁵ He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, (Eph. 1:3-5)

This doctrine of election (God choosing who will be saved) is taught in many other passages (see for example Acts 13:48; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; Rom. 9:10-24). From this selection of passages, we see that God *chose* and *determined* who would be saved from eternity past (this is His decree – Eph. 1:4), and then at a point in history He calls these people to Christ through the gospel (this is God's providence - Acts 13:48, 2 Thess. 2:13-14). God brings to pass what He has decreed to take place.

We can then conclude that God's decree and providence extends to every single thing that happens in all history:

In Him ¹¹ also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, (Eph. 1:11)

This is staggering. God directs the raindrops, the leaves that fall, the waves of the ocean, the birds that die. All their movements are planned and controlled by God. All the natural disasters, the sinful events and the salvation of the elect fall within God's decree and providence. All this includes second causes, and takes into account the free choices of men, so that their wills are not violated. How infinite is God's intellect! What infinite wisdom and power!

Can God's plans and purposes be changed by others?

The language of Isaiah 46:9-11 is definite. God will do all His pleasure, and will bring to pass all He has spoken. The rest of Scripture also uses this definite language. It never suggests that some of God's purposes will not be established. For example, Ephesians 1:11 is emphatic that all things work out according to God's counsel. Isaiah 14:24-27 is a close parallel with our main text. As God has thought and purposed, so it shall come to pass. Verse 27 concludes that God's purposes cannot be annulled and His hand cannot be turned back.

*For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it?
And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?
(Isa. 14:27)*

God's sovereignty must therefore be understood to mean that all He has planned and purposed will most definitely come to pass.

But didn't God look into the future to see what would happen?

In order to soften the very clear teaching on God's sovereignty (or its implications on human freedom and control), it has become popular to believe that God's decrees are based on his foresight of what will happen in history, and what choices people will make in their lives.

Such a view of God's sovereignty has no support from Scripture. In the first instance, if this were the case, then the language of Scripture is diabolically

deceptive. Note that Isaiah 46:9-11 describes whatever comes to pass as *God's counsel* as *His pleasure*. If He were to look into the future and see what would take place, and then ordain that, it could hardly be described as *His counsel* (as He is merely adopting what something or someone else has chosen to do) or *His pleasure* (as He is merely doing what someone else has been pleased to do). It would mean that God is secondary, and man primary. Scripture never indicates that this is the case. Indeed, when God has purposed something, and has stretched out his hand to bring it to pass, no human activity can prevent it (Isa. 14:26-27). God's counsel always overrules the plans man may have for himself:

*Many plans are in a man's heart,
But the counsel of the Lord will stand. (Prov. 19:21)*

Some may object...

This teaching on God's sovereignty has been articulated in many of the historic confessions of faith of the church. This means that these doctrines are not new, but were in fact the dominant, mainstream beliefs of many of the denominations. However, since then, many objections have been raised. Only three will be briefly mentioned here.

Am I a robot?

Within the framework of God's sovereignty, man still makes real choices. For example, those who put John the Baptist to death did to him whatever they *wished* (Mk. 9:13). They clearly acted according to their very real desires. When people sin, it is because they are drawn away and enticed by their *own* desires (Jam. 1:14). God's decrees and providence do not violate the will of the creature. God's sovereignty does not make man into a robot. Man makes real choices, and acts according to his will. Yet God remains sovereign, and brings His purposes to pass in such a manner that man's will is not violated.

Am I responsible for my actions and sins?

The Bible teaches that while God decrees all things, and makes them come to pass, man is still responsible for his actions, and his sin in particular.

Romans 9:10-24 sheds light on the subject. In this passage the basis of God's election is explicitly said to be independent of the future actions or works of Jacob or Esau. God chose Jacob and rejected Esau before they were born or had done any good or evil (vs 11). This is confirmed and clarified by verse 16. Neither man's *will* nor his *actions* are the basis of God's choice. This contradicts the view that God elected people on the basis of foresight of their faith. Rather, God's electing act is based on His free and sovereign choice, so that His purposes are established (vs 11). If God simply *responds* to faith that He sees people will exercise, how can God's purposes be established? He would then simply be responding to *man's* purposes!

Election is therefore a matter of God's sovereign grace, and He bestows this grace on whomever He chooses (Rom. 9:15). This truth is again confirmed and clarified by verses 19 to 24. In these verses Paul raises the natural question of the fairness of God in holding people responsible for their actions (verse 19). If God has chosen people based on His sovereign choice, and no one can resist His will, how can He find fault with people?

It must be emphasized that if God's election was simply based on foresight of man's actions, then Paul would have introduced the thought here to get rid of the difficulty. The whole process would then be entirely "fair," as man in fact determines his own destiny and God responds. It would all be "fair" and "understandable" from a purely human perspective.

Paul however, while affirming that God does hold men responsible for their sin, supplies a two-fold answer to this difficulty. Firstly, he rebukes man's attitude in judging and questioning God (verse 20). Secondly, Paul insists that the potter has power to make from the same lump of clay some vessels to honour and some to dishonour. Paul does not resolve the difficulty of how a sovereign God can still hold people responsible for their sins, but rather insists on God's power and right to do as He pleases (verses 21-23). This confirms the fact that ultimately, election is based on God's sovereign choice. At the same time, man is responsible for his actions and sins.

Are you not implying that God is the author of sin?

We have seen that God's decree and control of sin does not violate the wills of those committing the sins, and therefore does not diminish human and demonic responsibility for that sin. Yet it is also true that God never tempts anyone to sin. James 1:13-15 is the classic passage that teaches us that God is not the author of sin.

This language may seem a bit confusing. This is because the problem of God's relationship to evil is extremely complex. It is one of the most difficult issues in Scripture. According to Scripture, however, we can insist that God ordained evil to come to pass in such a way that man and Satan are responsible for that evil.

So why is this important?

Many churches today reject most, if not all, of the teaching on God's sovereignty. One may be tempted to then conclude that it is a difficult doctrine, not very clearly taught in Scripture, and so we should not make much of it. This is not so!

Firstly, the language of Scripture on the sovereignty of God is in fact clear. The teaching is straightforward, and the texts are abundant. The opposition to God's sovereignty is not due to the lack of clarity in Scripture, but rather because it contradicts modern ideas of man's absolute freedom of will and autonomy, which are considered as inviolate. In other words, God's sovereignty has become unpopular because our culture is strongly man-centred, and not because Scripture is unclear on the subject. This man-centeredness has unfortunately infiltrated the church.

Secondly, and most importantly, God makes much of His sovereignty. Consider our main text again (Isa. 46:9-11). Note that in verse 9 God is declaring his exclusive deity. In verse 10, we are given the basis of God's deity, namely, His sovereign declaration of the end from the beginning, and His sovereign ability to do all His pleasure. In other words, God is telling us that an important aspect of His deity is His sovereignty. Or, to put it differently, to deny God's sovereignty is to deny an essential aspect of His deity. A god who is not sovereign is not a god at all! It is therefore extremely

important to defend and uphold the doctrine of the sovereignty of God in our current man-centred culture.

Thirdly, a being who is subject and bound by man's will and actions is not worthy to be worshiped, nor trusted. He would not be able to fulfil His promises. He would continually be frustrated. Why would we even pray to Him, if He is not able to do what He has said He would?

The final book of the Bible concludes:

Then I heard something like the voice of a great multitude and like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. (Rev. 19:6)



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