

Is God's Sovereignty Antagonistic to Human Responsibility by Vern S. Poythress

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God's sovereignty

Have you ever asked yourself, "If God has planned everything from the beginning, what's the use of my working?" You may have wondered whether the Bible's teaching on God's sovereignty conflicted with your responsibility. The amazing thing is that a *deeper* understanding of God's sovereignty can dissolve your doubts. The Bible's teaching on God's rule over us is like medicine, of which a small dose can make you even sicker, but the full prescribed dose cures you.

The Bible's teaching is that God is so sovereign, so wise, that he can create men who *are* responsible. Your obligation, as God's servant, is not to analyze how God could do this, but to believe that he has. Jesus sovereignly predicts that Peter will deny him three times--but Peter knows afterwards that he is responsible; or think of Christ's works during his earthly life. God, speaking through the Old Testament, had sovereignly ordained that Christ would do the works that he did, but that doesn't make Christ less responsible. On the contrary, Christ says, "My *food* is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34). Christ takes pleasure in responsibly fulfilling God's sovereign decree. He didn't ask, "What's the use of my working?" The value of Christ's good works are not measured by whether he morally "could have" done evil, but rather by their conformity to God's law.

So it is with you. You also should take pleasure in fulfilling the Father's will. The fact that God works in you (Phil. 2:13) doesn't take away your responsibility--it simply takes away your *pride*.

Puppets or men

Have you heard people complain that God's sovereignty makes me puppets? Next time you hear it, try turning them to Philippians 2:12-13. Paul provides the answer in one sentence: "Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling, for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." If you believe in Christ, there is reason and purpose for your effort. You are not a puppet. God has adopted you, cares for you, transforms you for the sake of Christ. Therefore, you are not on a treadmill.

You can see this even better by asking what Paul might have said but didn't. He might have said, "Work out your own salvation, because God's isn't going to do it for you." That would be salvation by works, and a dethroning of God; or he could have said, "God is working in you; therefore, relax, lie back, just stop any kind of work yourself." That would be quietism and irresponsibility; or, third, he could have said, "Work in spite of the fact that God is working in you." That would be paradox. It would be saying, "God's work and our work seem to contradict each other, but the Bible teaches both, and so I've got to believe both." You may have taken that attitude yourself, but it is not what the Bible says.

Paul says, "For." Paul isn't talking about two sides of a paradox, but about your working being *positively* founded in and based on God's. Your labor is not worthless, because the eternal God who made heaven and earth dwells in you to bring to perfection the work that he has begun.

You can have confidence in the almighty power of his work. You ought to abound always in the work of the Lord, because you know that *in the Lord* your labor is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). You see, here is a motive for not giving up disciplining your children, or subduing that temper of yours, or witnessing to that stubborn neighbor. Praise the Lord that he has so blessed us with His presence in our work!