Neighborly Apologetics

Articles: NA-Free Will & Sovereignty - ~300 words, ~2000 words

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Free Will & Sovereignty

A Divine Mystery, Not a Contradiction

(Thumbnail Sketch from Del Tackett's Webinar, February 4, 2025)

The topic of free will and the sovereignty of God is one of the more difficult subjects Christians encounter, both in their own thinking and in conversations with neighbors. It is also one of the most important. The Neighborly Apologetics approach begins with the royal law of James 2:8: love your neighbor. For the first two centuries of the church, ordinary Christian families carried the primary work of the kingdom by loving the people God placed next to them. Academic apologists have done invaluable work over generations; our task is to take that truth and present it to Mrs. Smith—not with a lecture, but with wisdom, kindness, and gentleness as we build a trusted relationship.

This particular issue arises frequently. A neighbor may come from a background shaped by naturalism, by fatalism, or by a religious tradition that emphasizes destiny. She may be bitter because a loved one suffered and died despite her prayers, and she may conclude that if God were truly sovereign He would have prevented the tragedy. Or she may simply ask whether God is absolutely sovereign, whether human beings have real free will, and whether those two claims can both be true. Christians themselves are often divided over the answers. The goal is not to win an intramural debate with a neighbor who holds a different view, but to help her (and ourselves) see more clearly who God is and how we are to live in light of that reality.

We do not begin with man and then try to understand God. We begin with God as He has revealed Himself in general revelation and in His Word, and from that truth we better understand ourselves and our relationship to Him. The God who told Moses to take off his shoes because he stood on holy ground, the God whose name is "I AM," is the proper starting point for every hard question.

Several broad views shape how people approach free will. Naturalism, the foundation of much contemporary scientific thinking, holds that nothing exists outside matter and energy. Man is simply a product of the stuff inside the cosmic cube—a cause-and-effect machine without genuine free will. William Provine, in a debate with Phillip Johnson, summarized the implications of modern evolutionary biology in stark terms: no gods, no purpose, no life after death, no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning, and no free will. Most people who live inside this framework still feel an innate sense that they make real choices, yet the logic of naturalism forces them to deny it. The resulting tension is sharp: if nothing but matter and energy exists, then the naturalist's own claim that naturalism is true is itself determined, not freely asserted. Conversation itself becomes the mere spouting of predetermined responses. Related is the mind-body problem: if only the physical brain exists, where do the heart, the will, motives, and love come from? Few

people hold this position firmly, yet some feel compelled to argue it lest they open the door to something outside the closed system.

Fatalism, found in some Eastern religions and certain Islamic perspectives, is different. It pictures a person caught in an inescapable destiny usually attributed to an unknown higher power called fate. Incentive drains away; nothing can be changed. Determinism, by contrast, is the pure cause-and-effect chain with no external fate—dominoes knocking one another over in a closed world.

Process theology seeks to avoid a totally sovereign God and to grant greater sovereignty to man. It rests on the claim that change is the only absolute reality, so God Himself must be in process. He is often pictured as a grand chess master who does not know the future moves in advance yet is powerful enough to play well. Scripture, however, speaks differently. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. The plans of the Lord stand firm forever. Isaiah 46 declares that God makes known the end from the beginning and that His purpose will stand; He will do all that He pleases. He is not improvising alongside us.

Within Christianity the sharpest division falls between Arminian and Reformed understandings. Both hold a high view of Scripture and confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. Both affirm that God is sovereign. The difference lies in how far that sovereignty extends into the work of salvation. The Arminian position holds that God's sovereignty works within the free will of man; man has the ability to choose or reject salvation. The Reformed position holds that God's sovereignty is absolute over every decision; man's will has fallen so severely that a work of God is required, and man is saved by grace alone. Ordinary decisions (which shoe to put on first) are not the issue; the extent of God's sovereignty in salvation is. Our purpose here is not to settle that intramural debate but to equip believers for neighborly engagement.

Whenever these questions arise, the first and constant step is to gaze upon the face of God. A series of passages makes the biblical portrait of sovereignty unmistakable. In Ephesians 1 we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will. Not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from the Father; even the hairs of our head are numbered. Everything in heaven and earth belongs to the Lord; He is exalted as head over all. He made the heaven of heavens, the earth, and the seas, and He preserves them. By Him all things were created—visible and invisible, thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities—and in Him all things hold together. He forms light and creates darkness; He makes well-being and creates calamity. The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. As many as were appointed to eternal life believed. God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world according to the purpose of His will. Our God is in the heavens; He does all that He pleases. Nothing is too hard for Him. Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.

R.C. Sproul observed that many Christians salute the sovereignty of God but believe in the sovereignty of man; to say that God's sovereignty is limited by man's freedom is to make man sovereign. Reducing one necessarily raises the other. Spurgeon noted that no doctrine has more excited the hatred of mankind than the absolute sovereignty of God, because elevating God's sovereignty appears to diminish man's significance—and we resist the loss of significance. Opinions must not be formed from a desire to make man more significant. Jonathan Edwards wrote that absolute sovereignty is what he loves to ascribe to God; it has appeared to him a great part of God's glory. Some despise the notion precisely because of the significance issue. Sproul added that not one

piece of cosmic dust lies outside God's sovereign providence; in Him we live and move and have our being. A.W. Pink wrote that nothing in the vast universe—no revolving world, no star, no storm, no action of men, no errand of angels, no deed of the devil—can come to pass otherwise than God has eternally purposed. This is a foundation for faith and an anchor for the soul. It is not blind fate or unbridled evil that rules, but the Lord Almighty according to His good pleasure and for His eternal glory. Salvation itself is the work of God: He quickens the soul dead in trespasses and sins and maintains it in spiritual life.

At the same time, Scripture leads us to believe that man has the ability to make choices. Jesus longed to gather Jerusalem's children as a hen gathers her brood, "and you were not willing." The people built high places to Molech though it had not even entered God's mind that they should do so. Free will means God has given man the ability to choose, yet those choices are limited by nature. Man cannot choose to fly like an eagle or breathe through gills like a shark. He chooses freely within the bounds of his created nature.

Are absolute sovereignty and genuine free will contradictory? The law of non-contradiction says two propositions cannot both be true in the same sense at the same time. A jigsaw puzzle offers a useful picture: two pieces may look so different that one is convinced they cannot both belong, yet when the puzzle is completed they prove essential; the intervening pieces were simply missing. True contradiction would exist only if both pieces claimed to be the identical corner. Scripture presents both realities as true. Acts 2 states that Jesus was delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, yet the men of Israel nailed Him to a cross by the hands of godless men. In one passage God predetermined the event and human actors are held accountable. Philippians 2 commands believers to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in them both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Man is to work out what God is simultaneously working in him. Romans 9 declares that it depends not on human will or exertion but on God who has mercy. Yet man remains accountable when he sets his will contrary to God's righteousness.

The tension is therefore a mystery rather than a contradiction. There are depths about God far beyond finite comprehension. Wisdom calls us to rest in the wonder of what has been revealed. There is nothing wrong with accepting the truths of Scripture while not yet seeing how they fit together. They appear contradictory; they are both true because the Word of God declares them so.

C.S. Lewis offered an illustration of God's relation to time. Imagine an infinite sheet of paper stretching in every direction from all eternity past to all eternity future. On that paper draw a small dash representing the entire span of time as experienced by those confined to cause and effect. God exists all around the dash. He is the Alpha and the Omega—not merely that He was the beginning and will be the end, but that He is both, unbound by time and space. He is present at the beginning and present at the end. The cry of Jesus on the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" was an eternal cry because of who God is. God is not caught in process-theological time constraints. The sacrifice remains ever before Him; our eternal separation was paid for there.

A practical word follows. One of the most constant prayers of a true believer is that God would take away free will and insert His own will. In the glorified state we will no longer long for our own will. Scripture speaks far more of the heart than of the will, and when it speaks of the will it is usually God's will. Jesus taught that out of the heart come evil thoughts and actions. The heart drives the will; the will is not an autonomous faculty that can randomly move left or right. We act according to what we believe is really real. Truth claims arrive through the culture, through desires for

significance, and through the heart's own condition. In our own lives, in our children's lives, and in Mrs. Smith's life, the issue is the heart.

When a neighbor struggles with these questions, we do not begin with a philosophical defense of free will. We talk about the heart. We weep with those who weep. We season our speech with salt. We point them to the God who is sovereign, who is not improvising, whose purposes stand, and who has revealed Himself in His Word. We rest in the mystery that He is totally sovereign and that human beings are truly accountable. Both are true because Scripture says so. That is enough for finite creatures standing on holy ground before the God whose name is I AM.

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A Divine Mystery

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One of the harder questions neighbors (and believers) wrestle with is how God's sovereignty and human free will fit together. In the Neighborly Apologetics series, Dr. Del Tackett reminds us that the goal is not to win an argument with Mrs. Smith, but to love her well—weeping with her, building trust, and speaking truth with gentleness.

We begin, as always, with God. Scripture presents a God who works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11). Not a sparrow falls apart from the Father; the hairs of our head are numbered. He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, the One who forms light and darkness and whose purpose will stand. As R.C. Sproul noted, to limit God's sovereignty by man's freedom is ultimately to make man sovereign. Spurgeon observed that few doctrines have stirred more resistance, because elevating God's rule seems to diminish human significance.

At the same time, Scripture shows that people make real choices. Jesus longed to gather Jerusalem's children, "and you were not willing." Man has free will within the bounds of his nature. In Acts 2, Jesus is delivered by God's predetermined plan, yet the men of Israel are held accountable for nailing Him to the cross. Philippians 2 tells us to work out our salvation while God works in us to will and to act. These are not contradictions that force us to discard one truth; they are a mystery we accept because both are revealed in God's Word.

The practical focus is the heart. Jesus said that out of the heart come our thoughts and actions. The heart drives the will. When we talk with a neighbor struggling with suffering, sovereignty, or free will, we do not begin with philosophy. We talk about the heart, point them to the God who is in control, and rest in the wonder that He is totally sovereign and that we are truly accountable—both true because Scripture says so.

That is enough for finite creatures standing before the God whose name is I AM.

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