

A Sovereign and Personal God

A Call to Spiritual Reformation, Week 8

Chapter 9 Overview

I. Introduction (145-48)

1. The question: If prayer changes things, how can we believe that God is sovereign and all-knowing?
2. Simplistic Response 1: God must be severely limited in certain ways
3. Simplistic Response 2: The only change prayer effects is within the person praying
4. “The Bible insists that we pray, urges us to pray, gives us examples of prayer. Something has gone wrong if our reasoning leads us away from prayer; something is amiss in our theology if our theology becomes a disincentive to pray” (147)

II. God’s Sovereignty and Human Responsibility (148-56)

1. Two truths taught or exemplified throughout Scripture (148)
 1. “God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in Scripture to reduce human responsibility.”
 2. “Human beings are responsible creatures - that is, they choose, they believe, they disobey, they respond, and there is moral significance to their choices; but human responsibility never functions in Scripture to diminish God's sovereignty or to make God absolutely contingent.”
2. “High level” defense of each proposition
3. Seven passages where these truths come together
 1. Genesis 50:19-20 – Joshua and his brothers
 2. 2 Samuel 24 – David and the census
 3. Isaiah 10:5-19 – Assyrian conquest of Israel
 4. John 6:37-40 – Jesus is the Bread of Life
 5. Philippians 2:12-13 – Continue to work out your salvation ... for it God who works in you
 6. Acts 18:9-10 – God’s people in Corinth
 7. Acts 4:23-30 – the believers’ prayer and the crucifixion

III. Mystery and the Nature of God (156-60)

1. These two statements do not embrace a deep contradiction, but includes a level of mystery
 1. Freedom should not be understood as absolute power to act contrary to God’s will. Instead, we should understand it as connected to desire – what human beings voluntarily choose.
2. God does not stand behind good and evil in exactly the same way
3. The two propositions concerning God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are tied to the nature of God
 1. He is transcendent

2. He is personal
3. The mystery in the two propositions “is no more and no less than the mystery of God himself” (cf. the doctrine of the Trinity – mystery without contradiction)

IV. Conclusion(160-166)

1. Question: How can we assure that these complementary pairs of truths operate the right way in our lives? Answer: We must do our best to ensure that these complementary truths function in our lives in the same ways they function in the lives of believers in Scripture.
 1. With general regard to specific doctrines
 - a) How does election function in Scripture?
 - b) How do the constant exhortations to believe and obey function?
 - c) How does the repeated truth of God’s sovereign providence function?
 2. With regards to prayer, how does God’s sovereignty function where prayer is introduced?
 - a) Never as a disincentive to pray, but it can forbid some kinds of “preposterous praying”
 - b) As an incentive to pray in line with God’s will
 - c) “... the faithful will insist that, properly handled, both God’s sovereignty and his personhood become reasons for more prayer, not reasons for abandoning prayer. It is worth praying to a sovereign God because he is free and can take action as he wills; it is worth praying to a personal God because he hears, responds, and acts on behalf of his people, not according to the blind rigidities of inexorable fate.” (165)
2. “In short, despite the fact that God's nature is in many respects profoundly mysterious to us, we shall not go far wrong if we allow the complementary aspects of God's character to function in our lives the way they function in the lives of his servants in the Scripture. Then we will learn the better how to pray, and why we should pray, and what we should pray for, and how we should ask. We shall discover that the biblical emphasis on God's sovereignty and on God's personhood, if they function in our lives properly, will serve both as powerful incentives to prayer and as direction for the way in which we approach God.” (165-66)

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Discussion Questions

1. What are the two truths that must be held together if we are to think biblically about prayer? How are these truths tied to the very nature of God?
2. If we grant that there is some mystery in the way these two truths hang together, how can they function in our lives without constant distortion? Give some examples. Include some comment on Daniel's reasoning in the prayer recorded in Daniel 9.
3. Select one of the following passages and explain it to someone: Genesis 50:19-20; Isaiah 10:5-16; Acts 4:23-30; Philippians 2:12-13.
4. Does prayer change things?