

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time*

Answering Big Questions About the Sovereignty of God

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: GTY125

PHIL JOHNSON: Hi, I'm Phil Johnson and I'm here in the studio today with John MacArthur and we're going to talk about the sovereignty of God.

John, we've done a number of these studio interviews over the years, going back...I think...I think the first one we ever did was on September 11, 2001. We got in the studio that afternoon right after those attacks and spent some time and you answered questions starting with the main questions we knew people were going to ask. "Where was God when this happened? Why did He allow it to happen? And how are we supposed to think of God's sovereignty in the midst of terrible disaster like that?" And that was the first of these discussions we had. In the year since then, we've done close to a dozen other Q&A sessions and we've dealt with issues like The Gospel, The Seeker-Friendly Church Movement, the issue of How Far the Church Should Go in Adapting Methodology in our message to the culture we're trying to reach. We've talked about The Doctrine of Election, and most recently the problem of Apostasy. And we chose those subjects because they're the ones people ask questions about. We chose those conversations based on questions we hear from listeners and questions that, frankly, we grapple with sometimes ourselves.

And you may have noticed that there is a common thread that runs through virtually every one of those conversations, the issue that always seems to come up is the sovereignty of God. And we've actually never addressed that issue by itself head on, and today that's what we want to do.

God's sovereignty is not an easy issue, is it? It's a subject that raises lots of questions and we want to ask you some of those questions today and get your help in finding biblical answers.

JOHN MACARTHUR: Phil, I think this is really an important thing because that question is raised all the time and rarely answered. People throw around the idea, "Well, God is sovereign, or, Is God Sovereign?" And they grapple for an answer to that. So I think this will help a lot of people if we can get a biblical handle on how to understand the sovereignty of God.

PHIL: Yeah, one of the reasons it's so difficult is that no matter how you answer the question, Is God in control of everything?, you find yourself in trouble. Because if you say, "No, He's not in control of everything," then you've got a God who lacks power over something and if you say, "Yes, He is in control of everything," you run right up against the problem of evil.

JOHN: Yeah, then you've got to explain why things are the way they are. But the bottom line may be a good place to start would be to say, "I would much rather know that God is in charge of everything than to think that He's not, then the whole universe is a threat."

PHIL: Yeah, that's right.

JOHN: And all of life takes on a frightening character.

PHIL: Well, let's start at the very beginning and I'll just ask you, What does the Word "sovereignty" mean?

JOHN: It means absolute rule. We would have a little difficulty in America understanding the word "sovereignty" since we've never lived under a sovereign. It's a form of the word "sovereign." Sovereign was a designation of the person who reigned, the single ruler, the king, the monolithic power, the unilateral authority and that is essentially what...to say God is sovereign means, that He is the sole ruler, He is the sole authority.

PHIL: So, in a sense, when we confess Jesus as Lord, we're confessing that He is sovereign.

JOHN: Yeah, and another way to express sovereignty in that sense is to say that Jesus is Lord. When we say "Lord" we're meaning He's in full control. The actual word in the New Testament is *kurios* and its corresponding word is *doulos* and *doulos* means slave and *Kurios* means Lord.

So to say that Jesus is Lord is to then confess that I am a slave and that is an affirmation that He's the sovereign over me.

PHIL: Now, is this one of those issues that's clear in Scripture or somewhat mysterious? How much stress would you say Scripture puts on this doctrine?

JOHN: I think it is everywhere in Scripture. It is inescapable, everywhere in Scripture God is designated clearly and revealed to be sovereign. I don't think it's a question of revelation, I think it's a question of comprehension. The Bible is crystal-clear that God is the ruler, that God rules, that God does what He will, that no one can thwart His purpose, no one can stop His hand, that all things work together for good, that He is orchestrating all of human history and everything in it. Scripture says that.

Like other things, we can know that that's what the Bible says but not fully comprehend how that works out, or why things are the way they are, if that is in fact true. But as to the truthfulness of it, it is crystal-clear in Scripture. There's no equivocating on that.

PHIL: So, people always say then, “But that’s fatalism.” How is that different from fatalism?

JOHN: Well, because God has an intention within His actions that is not purely arbitrary and it is not left to chance. Fatalism would be the assumption that things are going to be whatever they’re going to be, just because they’re going to be that way. There’s no superintending power, there’s no overriding plan, there’s no person who is purposefully doing all of these things, or allowing these things, fitting them together for a pre-determined plan. Fatalism just looks at the universe as random acts, going whatever way they go by chance. That’s very different than the sovereignty of God because God is purposefully taking all contingencies, all actions, all events and working them together to a pre-determined end. Nothing is by chance. Nothing is happenstance. Nothing is a surprise to Him. Nothing is outside His box, there are no, “Oops, how did that happen?” to God. It is all within the framework of His plan. It needs to be said at that point that doesn’t mean that God motivates everything that happens, He doesn’t...doesn’t motivate evil, He doesn’t cause evil, He doesn’t do evil. What it does say is, however, evil does not change the plan. Evil does not deter God. Evil does not cause God to have to alter His purpose. He takes all that happens and fits it into the plan and the plan is already determined.

PHIL: Now see, immediately we run headlong into the problem of evil and this is the thing that always comes up with the sovereignty of God. And I suppose it’s the hardest and most obvious question of all about God’s sovereignty, if God is all powerful and if nothing happens apart from His purpose, why is there evil?

JOHN: Well first of all, Phil, let me say this. If God is God, and He is, and if you go back before anything existed when all there was was God, the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, it would be obvious at that point that whatever was going to happen from creation on, would be what God wanted to happen. So if you start at that point...you know, if somebody else brought the universe into existence, and God was trying to get control of it, that would be one thing. But look, if the Lamb was slain before the foundation of the world, if God planned the death of Jesus Christ before the foundation of the world, before anything was ever made that was made, then He must have planned for sinners to be redeemed which meant that He must have put into the plan the allowance for sinners to fall, so the whole scenario of redemption is bound up in what He planned before everything began.

In other words, God created the world in full awareness that He was going to redeem the world. So everything that was going to be falling into the category of sin was within the framework of His purpose. So the question really is, why did God allow evil? What was the purpose for which God allowed evil? Clearly if there’s nothing in existence and He makes the world and the universe and plans for this redemption to take place, then He had to plan sin into it while not being responsible for sin itself.

PHIL: So, we can't maybe give a complete answer...why is there evil?...but certainly one of the reasons is so that God can destroy it and glorify Himself in doing so. That's what you're saying.

JOHN: Yeah, I think there's two sides to it. I think, one, God has a right and Paul makes this clear in Romans 9, God has a right to put His power on display against evil. Think of it this way, God is displaying Himself to the holy angels, God is displaying Himself to the saints in His full glory. What would that look like? Well if you're...if there's no evil in the world then there's no way to display your wrath, your vengeance, your justice, your judgment. And if there's no evil in the world, there's no way...on the other hand, the positive side, there's no way to display your grace, your mercy, your compassion, your kindness your tenderness and yet those are attributes of God. Clearly they are attributes of God, they were attributes of God before anything was ever created.

So as I look at allowing evil, I would say that the simplest explanation is the presence of evil in the world lets God display the fullness of His nature, both in His anger and His righteousness and His holiness and His wrath and His judgment, and all that side, as well as His mercy and compassion, and grace on the other side. And He has a right to put Himself on full display in order that He might be forever glorified for the God that He is.

PHIL: Yeah, the other thing that underlines then is that God's purpose is ultimately good.

JOHN: His purpose ultimately is to glorify Himself which is the ultimate good. You know, we can't...you know, it's a mature thing, I think, for people to get to the point where they realize that. Most people, many Christians think that the whole plan of redemption is really for them. You know, God loves you...you hear this all the time...unconditionally, and, you know, He wants to save you and He wants to do all these things for you. And while that is an intermediate objective, the ultimate objective is the glory of God. And so when you look at the problem of evil, you don't ask well this seems unfair to me because of how it affect me, or how it affects people. You have to ask the question, how does it affect God? And if it affects Him to the full display of His glory, then it is the ultimate good.

PHIL: Now you grew up in a Christian family, so you probably grew up hearing these things all your life. But do you have any idea...

JOHN: Well, I heard the questions. I can honestly tell you, I don't think I ever heard the answer.

PHIL: Well, I've got to say from my own testimony, it's hard to appreciate how mind-blowing this concept is to someone who's never really thought of it.

JOHN: Yeah.

PHIL: And my first semester in Bible college, I remember very clearly my first theology class, the first lesson of day one, we had to learn the definition of the decree of God, that the decree of God is His eternal purpose according to the counsel of His own will whereby for His own glory He has unchangeably foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. And I think that's...I think that's borrowed...the language is borrowed from the Westminster Catechism, but that was the first I had heard it and it just blew me away. Do you believe Scripture teaches that?

JOHN: Absolutely. Yeah, I think that is exactly what the Bible teaches. So you grew up, nice Christian boy in a nice Christian family thinking that everything was kind of flying around in a random world and God somehow intervened here and there and saved a few people to take them to heaven.

PHIL: Yeah. I grew up in an Arminian church, actually, where I thought that evil was pretty much in charge and God was trying to...trying to gain control.

JOHN: Trying to get a handle on it, yeah. As I said at the beginning, you know, this is the most encouraging doctrine of all. It...you know, just to give you an illustration. Very near our church is a very large and well-established Charismatic Church. And there was a time not long ago when we had a huge influx of people coming from that church, coming into our church. In fact, there were so many of them in one group that I was asked if I would go to the choir room at our church, at Grace Church, and meet a choir loft full of these people who had just come over from this other Charismatic Church.

PHIL: Wow.

JOHN: And as it turned out, they were young couples whose parents were the staff of that church. So this was kind of a rift in the family. And I said, you know, this sort of mass movement over here, what brought you here? And they said this, I'll never forget it, "We could not live any longer under the sovereignty of Satan." I had never heard that. "We could not live any longer under the sovereignty of Satan. We were so burdened by the fact that Satan might come in the house and kill your baby, you know, cause your baby to be smothered. We were going around the house praying Satan out of this room and demons out of that room and believing that, you know, Satan could give you cancer, and Satan wanted you sick and God wanted you well and Satan wanted you to have a calamity and God didn't, and so if you had a calamity and got sick, Satan was taking over your life." And they called it the sovereignty of Satan. And one of them said to me, "We had people in this group who were suffering from panic attacks, heart...racing heart palpitation, I mean, it was literally terrifying these people to think that Satan was in charge."

Now this played out in a drama that's beyond comprehension because the pastor of that church who had become the pastor of the church was in his church on a Wednesday night and a prophet had come to town and announced that he was...this pastor was going to be a preacher of the work to the

world, he was going to do miracles and he was going to be a great preacher. And at the time the prophet was speaking, he fell over...the preacher fell over and died.

I went to the funeral and I asked somebody. "What...what happened? Was the prophecy true?" The prophecy was supposed to be from God, God's telling me to tell you this guy is going to be a great preacher around the world...here's the answer I got..."Well the prophecy was true and it was so threatening that Satan killed him." What? Satan killed your pastor to cancel out a divine plan?

No thanks. Now you can understand why people living in that kind of environment would be just under horrendous fear. So I think you have to start with the fact that we reject the sovereignty of Satan in the world. Satan is a servant of God, he can only work within the perimeters that God defines and I would far rather live in a world even with difficult questions, even with challenging questions, and they're very challenging, knowing that God was in complete charge because He's good and holy and righteous...than to believe that either it's random and nobody's in charge, or even worse yet, Satan's in charge.

PHIL: That's really the central lesson of the book of Job, isn't it?

JOHN: It is. Even when you can't explain anything...and you ask...that is what Job...Job lived this conversation. What does he do? He's prosperous, everything is going great, all of a sudden his children are killed, he loses everything, including his own health, all he's got left is his wife and she's no help. She's saying, you know, "Curse God, and die." And he's...he can't figure out a reason for this. He cannot figure out a reason. You know, he goes to his friends, they give him really stupid advice and bad counsel and bad theology and he doesn't know where to turn and the amazing part of the book of Job is, God finally talks to Job and never tells him why this is even happening.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: Never gives him any answer. All He says to him is, "I don't owe you anything, this is not information you need, I don't answer to you."

PHIL: Basically declares His own sovereignty.

JOHN: He declared His sovereignty to Job and said, "You're not in charge, where were you when I made the world?" The interesting thing about it is Job never got the information that we get.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: We know why it happened because Satan came to God and said, "Yeah, Job only serves You because You bless him." And He said, "I'll prove different."

God was proving a point to Satan, we know that, Job never knew that. It's as if to say in future history maybe, we can look back and maybe God will...maybe they'll be something written about our lives when we get to heaven and we'll say, "Oh, so that's what was going on when that happened." But while we're experiencing, God owes us no explanation. I love the end of the book of Job, Job 42:6, where Job says, "I had heard of You but now my eyes sees You, I really see You as sovereign and I repent in dust and ashes. I repent for the sin of not trusting You and Your sovereignty." And I think...that's where I want...I'm happy to live in the sovereignty of God with the suffering that is there.

Illustration, just a few days ago we had a little three-year-old boy in our church die, cycled through Leukemia three different times in three years, and he went to heaven. And his mother wrote the most beautiful, beautiful tribute to God for giving that little Malachi to them for three years and celebrated his home going and celebrated him being in the presence of Christ. You can deal with anything in life if you have that sense of what Scripture reveals that God is in charge. And, of course, since the Bible indicates that the little ones that die enter in to His presence, this was a time of rejoicing. She even said, "No more...you know, no more shots, no more pricks and pokes and, you know, treatments," and all of that. I can live joyfully in a world whatever the issues are in that world, knowing that a good God for His own glory is managing every single thing that's going on.

PHIL: Yeah, now it still raises questions that are very difficult. Take Job, for example, at the beginning of the book we learn that Satan couldn't do one thing to him without the express permission of God. So it's clear that God is sovereign, but how does that not make God then somehow responsible for what happened

JOHN: I like what somebody said, "The devil is God's devil."

PHIL: I think Luther said that.

JOHN: Yeah, Luther said that. The devil is God's devil. God is responsible for evil in the broad sense that He willed it to exist without causing it in itself...that's a fine line distinction. But God distances Himself from evil, God who cannot lie, God who is holy, holy, holy. Or as Habakkuk puts it, "He can't look upon iniquity, can't look upon evil." As if to say, He can't come near to it. Or in the words of James, "God tempts no man." No evil is directly caused by God. No evil is indirectly caused by God. Evil is allowed by God but He distances Himself from that. And while that may be a concept that has, you know, is a little too profound for us to understand the fine line of distinction, the Bible makes that clear distinction.

PHIL: Yeah, the standard theological precision term that we use is, "God is not the author of evil, He's not the agent of it. He's not the efficient cause of it."

JOHN: Right...right.

PHIL: But He is sovereign over it.

JOHN: Right, but first of all, He allowed it. And again we go back to what I said, He allowed it for His own glory. He allowed it so He could put His judgment, justice, vengeance, wrath on display. And He allowed it so He could put His grace, mercy, kindness, forgiveness and redemption on display. And then forever and ever throughout all the eons of eternity, He will be glorified and honored and praised for the full display of His glory.

PHIL: And in the punishment of evil doers, His justice is put on display.

JOHN: Yes.

PHIL: But there's a problem there, too, because...and you'll often get this question...how do you answer this question? Doesn't it seem cruel of God to allow evil and then punish the evil doer?

JOHN: I don't know that there's any way for me to come to 100 percent comfortable position because there's always this nagging reality in your mind that there are people who have literally been fitted into a divine purpose that ends up in damnation. I mean ... I have a difficult time comprehending that. But at that point, I exercise my faith, but it is no more confusing to me to deal with that dilemma than it is to deal with the opposite dilemma which is, "Why in the world did God save Me?" Why did He save me? That is as confusing to me as why He didn't save somebody else.

PHIL: Yeah, and I want to get to that. God's sovereignty in the matter of salvation, that's a sticking point for many people, but let me sort of segue to that by asking, is there anything God is not sovereign over?

JOHN: No, nothing. He's sovereign over absolutely everything. That is not to say that this is some direct, immediate, hands-on work in which God does everything. It is to say that He controls all the contingencies.

Look, Luther...speaking of Luther...wrote about the freedom of the will. The will of sinful man is free in the sense that He can choose his sin, right? I mean, he's not driven by God toward some sin, the freedom of the will as exercised, man has freedom in which he can pick his poison, he can choose his sin. The amazing reality when you think about the sovereignty of God is how God takes all of those acts of freedom and those infinite contingencies and controls them all to the ultimate end which He has predetermined. That's what sovereignty is. I see it as more the control of all the things that are going on. Sometimes it is direct. Sometimes it is...I mean, it was pretty direct when He drowned the whole world. That was...that was a very direct, sovereign act. But there are all those other

contingencies in which while He's not directly in the act itself, He is working all of those things to His own end.

PHIL: Now, I don't get to correct you very often, so I'm going to jump on my opportunity. It was actually Edwards that wrote *The Freedom of the Will*. Luther wrote a book called *The Bondage of the Will*.

JOHN: *The Bondage of the Will*, yeah. I got that wrong.

PHIL: And the titles...you put them...in fact, I have them next to each other on my shelf and it sounds like they're taking opposite positions. One's writing on the freedom of the will, the other is writing on the bondage of the will...and yet...

JOHN: Yeah, they're saying the same thing.

PHIL: On that issue they were saying the same thing.

JOHN: Exactly. Right.

PHIL: So, is the human will bound, or is it free?

JOHN: Yeah it is both. It is free in the sense that it can *choose* its sin. It is bound in the sense that it can *only* choose its sin.

PHIL: Hmm...but it will choose sin?

JOHN: It will. But you can pick your poison.

PHIL: So it is true, in a sense, in fact it's true in the most fundamental sense to say that when I sin, I do so freely and not under compulsion? God isn't causing me to sin just because He's sovereign?

JOHN: No...no, that is correct and that's a very important thing to say. You don't sin under divine compulsion. You sin under the freedom of your will, or if you want to call it under the bondage of your will to sin. You're bound to sin, you can do nothing but sin. You know, even the good that man does is filthy rags, Isaiah says.

PHIL: All right, you said there's nothing God is not sovereign over. One of the...one of the areas where I think a lot of people seem to struggle with that is human government, and yet Scripture is explicit, right? The heart of a king is in the hand of the Lord, He turns it however He wants.

JOHN: Absolutely.

PHIL: Does that even apply in a democratic government like ours where we elect our leaders? Is God still in charge of who's our President and...

JOHN: Why wouldn't it apply? It applies in any situation. You have the big picture thing which is government is ordained of God, the powers be ordained of God, Romans 13. That's simply saying that government as a reality, as a social reality is ordained by God for the well-being of man. But we're talking about something different here.

Was Caesar in power at the time of Jesus? Was Herod in power at the time of Jesus? Within the sovereignty of God or outside the sovereignty of God, the answer to that would be within the purposes of God, those men were where they were. What always interests me is how the New Testament says, "Honor those that are over you in the Lord. Submit to those who are over you." And He was talking about those very men, those very pagan to the core men.

PHIL: In fact, if I understand the chronology you give in the Study Bible, Nero was the person...he was the Caesar in charge when Paul wrote Romans 13 and Paul didn't exclude him and say, "Since he's such a bad guy, it's okay to show him disrespect."

JOHN: Yeah, and you may look long and hard in the New Testament in the life and ministry of Jesus trying to find Him demonstrate an anti-current government attitude, but you won't find it. He never makes a comment about the government, other than to pay your taxes.

PHIL: Even though He was...He Himself personally was dragged around by the Roman government.

JOHN: By the Roman government and basically tried on trumped-up charges, lies. He never calls down judgment on the system...never. Because that's not the agenda, that's not the purpose, that's not the plan. Plus it was all in the predetermined counsel and foreknowledge of God that it was working out that way and He saw it that way. That doesn't mean we tolerate the evil and the wickedness in the leadership. Certainly Jesus confronted that in the leaders of Israel in no uncertain terms and so did the Apostle Paul and even the other Apostles who write...

PHIL: Not to mention John the Baptist, lost his head over it.

JOHN: Yeah, John lost his head and he lost his head because he confronted the ruler. But at the same time, I don't think our purpose is to say, "Well if such-and-such leader is in place...wow, is God not in charge?" I mean, look in America, are we going to say, "Wow, we had a Christian President in George Bush, guy claimed to be a Christian. Wow, God put him in. Now we have a non-Christian President, Obama, the devil put him in." I think the right answer is we put them both in within the large

purposes of God to accomplish His ends.

PHIL: And God has a purpose even going back to Paul's time, Nero, even though Nero instituted the harshest kind of persecution, Paul is still saying that God ordained him...

JOHN: Yeah, and that's a good place to go when you've got Nero killing Christians and Paul saying, "Submit to Nero."

PHIL: Hmm. Yeah.

JOHN: Yeah, I think the trend with Christians today is to say, you know, "This is a horrible thing that's going on in our nation, you know, we're going to be Communists, and they're going to raise our taxes and all of this and where is God when we need Him?" Right where He's always been. I don't have any fear about that. And while we might not like what's going on and if we're given the opportunity, you know, we use legal means to vote and do whatever we can. In the end of the day, it's wonderful to be able to live in perfect confidence that this is all within the larger purpose of God who hasn't lost control of anything.

PHIL: Now we might still say that's a horrible thing. Going back to say September 11, something that I think all of us would agree, was a horrible thing and yet, it doesn't make it any less horrible to say God is sovereign over it.

JOHN: No, and that's right. And if you have a horrible leader and a person who is doing wrong things, they are wrong and you can make that judgment. What you have to understand is that that does not honor God, that is not what God desires the person to do, but it will not in any sense overpower the final purpose of God and He will work these things into His intention.

PHIL: In fact He'll use even those people who oppose Him to accomplish His will.

JOHN: He makes the wrath of men to praise Him.

PHIL: That, I think, is the most amazing thing about the sovereignty of God, how He does make even the wrath of men to praise Him, while it's easy to get frustrated when people all around us, Atheists are more aggressive than ever, God will use all that to glorify Himself.

JOHN: Yeah, it kind of reminds you of the story of Joseph, doesn't it? Go back and look at the story of Joseph and the wrath of men and selling Joseph off like a slave and how they could never, ever, ever have imagined or predicted how God would use that event.

PHIL: Yeah, you could say that Joseph lived this conversation, as well.

JOHN: Yeah.

PHIL: Well let's do talk then about the sovereignty of God in salvation. This seems to be the sticking point for a lot of Christians, that if God is sovereign over salvation, the ramifications of that for them are very difficult because it means if God's not going to save everyone...why?

JOHN: Well, the bottom line is this, and everybody would agree with this, except Universalists, "Not everybody's going to be saved." Right? Because there is a hell and, in fact, most people aren't going to be saved. If you just take the words of Jesus, "The gate is narrow, the way is narrow, few there be that find it."

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: And then you have that passage in Luke 13 where His disciples say to Him, "Are only a few going to be saved?" I mean, they're starting to put two and two together. They've been at this now two years plus, they're months from the cross and the true believers are a small little group. And they ask the question, "Are only a few going to be saved?" So we all have to start there and we say, "Okay, look, not everybody is going to be saved."

And then the question has to be asked, "By whose determination is that true?" Well the only possible answer is God. If not everybody is going to be saved, then God planned not everybody to be saved, right?

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: There's no way around that. I mean, God starts with a blank and He creates the universe and then the whole thing unfolds, He is God, He can do whatever He pleases. So if not everybody is going to be saved, then it was in the purpose of God that not everybody was going to be saved. So I think if you start there, it's a little clearer to understand.

If not everybody is going to be saved, then you could say, "Well who...who decided not everybody was going to be saved?" Well you could say, "Well sinners decide that." Well then God decided that sinners could decide that knowing that sinners wouldn't decide that. I mean, you don't escape...

PHIL: Right.

JOHN:the dilemma.

PHIL: Ultimately if God is sovereign, this is His plan.

JOHN: He is sovereign and it is His plan that He would be glorified in judgment as He would be glorified in salvation. But I think you've always got to move from the sovereignty of God to the reality that the Bible also holds sinners fully responsible for their sin and their rejection of the gospel. And you can't lose that tension. I don't know how that harmonizes and I always end up at this point...Look, sinners are responsible. God says, "Why will you die?," you know, Jesus says, "Search the scriptures, they are they that speak of Me," you know. Invitations are all through the Scripture and given by our Lord Himself and given by the Apostles and given by Isaiah. You know, come. And give by Jesus at the end of the book of Revelation, come...and the sinner is responsible to act and to come. And if he does not, he's fully culpable.

So, I love the fact that that tension is there, that God holds the rejecting sinner, the unbelieving sinner fully responsible for his rejection. How that harmonizes with the sovereignty of God in saving some is beyond my comprehension.

PHIL: Now those of us who are saved also when we come to understand these truths are forced to acknowledge that if it were not for the grace of God, we also would have rejected Him. So the fact that I'm saved, I don't get to take any credit for, God did that, He overruled me in order to save me.

JOHN: Paul says, "I am what I am by the grace of God." I love that in 1 Timothy 1, he says, "I was a blasphemer, I was a murderer, but He put me in the ministry."

PHIL: Now, those who think superficially about these things always ask the question then, "How is it fair for God to do for one what He doesn't do for another?"

JOHN: Well, it's according to your definition of "fair." I would have to say that fallen people probably have a fallen view of fair, and it would be...it would be a view that assumes what is fair. Fair doesn't rule the universe. God rules the universe. And whatever God does is right, whatever God does is just. So by God's definition, this was the determined righteous thing for Him to do. Whether or not it is quote/unquote fair from a human viewpoint, was not the determining plan in God's mind. But at the same time, Phil, and I think this is so important, this is where you find some solid footing in a very difficult quicksand when you realize that you go back to human responsibility. You go back to the fact that you rejected. You even can go back and say, "What about the pagans? What about the people who didn't hear?" Well I'm convinced that Scripture says if you live up to the light you have, you know, God would bring more light. I just think that man is always made responsible for his rejection.

PHIL: Yeah, and so my answer would be, I don't want what's fair because if I got what was fair....

JOHN: Well yeah, that's the other side of the question. If fair rules, then nobody's saved...if you're talking about fair.

PHIL: So the really, really hard question, if you get beyond the superficial aspect of this, the really hard question and I think you said it at the beginning, it's not why does God not save everybody, but why does He save anyone?

JOHN: Save anybody...yeah, and I think that's the right view of the Old Testament. I've said that through the years. People say, "What kind of a God kills this person and kills that person and what kind of a God drowns, you know, the Egyptian army, and what kind of a God sends, you know, bears out of the woods to tear up a bunch of young men yelling "bald head" at a prophet? What kind of a God opens up the ground and swallows people. And those...those kinds of questions really aren't nearly as important to me as what kind of a God saves people who don't deserve salvation and can't do anything to earn it?"

PHIL: Humph.

JOHN: A God of grace. And that's the way you turn the thing on its head, in that sense, and you come back again to the personal accountability issue that every sinner is held responsible for his own unbelief.

PHIL: The other major difficulty that people have with the sovereignty of God in salvation is the question of evangelism. If God chooses whom to save, why should we do evangelism?

JOHN: Well the answer to that, of course, is well because we don't know who they are. Was it Spurgeon who said...somebody asked him the same question, "Why do you evangelize all the time if people are elect?" He said, "Well if you'll help me pull up their shirt so I can see if they have an 'E' stamped on their back, you know, that would help." Since we don't know...

I actually had a prominent well-known preacher tell me one of his children was not elect...who, by the way, has since come to confess Christ.

PHIL: So he was elect after all.

JOHN: He was. But since this is what we call a secret decree and we don't know, you know, we can't assume, that's the first thing. The second thing is that even the elect can't be saved apart from the proclamation of the gospel because faith comes by hearing. How will they hear without a preacher? So the elect have to hear to believe. Since we don't know who they are, we are called to fulfill the Great Commission and to proclaim the gospel to every creature.

PHIL: Yeah, that verse that you just quoted, "How shall they hear without a preacher?" comes in Romans 10 which is set in three chapters where the focus is on the sovereignty of God in salvation, Romans 9, 10 and 11, and yet it says, "How shall they hear without a preacher?"

JOHN: Yeah, that is the most dramatic...that ninth chapter is the most dramatic chapter on sovereign election where he even talks about vessels fitted to destruction and the Lord saving whom He will, hardening whom He will. Strong, strong language. And it's in that context that we're told that whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved. And then how are they going to call on Him whom they have not heard? How they going to hear without a preacher? How they going to preach until they've been sent? So that reaffirms the Great Commission.

PHIL: Yeah, coming in that context, it is not saying...Well, that the Lord is helpless to save anyone without our help. What it is actually saying, it seems, is that God ordained the means by which people will be saved.

JOHN: Yeah, and we've said that through the years that God not only ordains the end, which is the salvation of sinners, but the means which is believers proclaiming the gospel.

PHIL: So it is my responsibility, and that's why it's a command, to evangelize, to proclaim the gospel.

JOHN: Because we are the means. How will they hear without a preacher? You know, we talked about that in the series on *The Twelve Ordinary Men*. They carried the commission in that first generation...twelve very unlikely guys. And there was no Plan B and there was not second string. They had the responsibility to proclaim the gospel as the first wave of gospel preachers after the Lord Himself. And it continues since then. God still uses the means of those who believe in Him to be the agents by which He brings His elective purpose to pass.

PHIL: All right, the issue of salvation is where you usually hear that question. If God is ordained, who is going to be saved? Why should I then...why do we need to proclaim the gospel? But there are variations on that question that you occasionally hear in other realms. If God ordains, who is going to be in control in the government, why should I vote? You know, if God ordains when I'm going to die, why should I wear a seatbelt? These are common questions and they all share the same fallacy, right?

JOHN: Well sure. The assumption is the fatalism takes over and what's going to be is going to be and you forget that within the purpose of God to accomplish His saving end, there are freedoms, right? As a believer, I'm free to obey or disobey, right? I might have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone. I might be obedient and do it. I might be disobedient and not do it. But if I'm obedient and do it, maybe God uses me as the means to that person's salvation. If I'm disobedient, I can't say well it doesn't matter, it wasn't supposed to be me...you know, the Lord will find someone else to do that...but within the purposes of God to save people and within the command of the Great Commission, we have the freedom to be disobedient or obedient, even as we've manifested that freedom.

PHIL: That still doesn't change the sovereignty of God, right? If I am disobedient, He has a plan even for that, that doesn't justify my disobedience.

JOHN: Exactly.

PHIL: His plan, in that case, might involve my discipline.

JOHN: And it likely will and it should because He disciplines you for the purpose of calling you to righteousness and obedience.

PHIL: Let me kind of shift gears here. The doctrine of God's sovereignty is sometimes abused by well-meaning believers who affirm the doctrine but abuse it in different ways. We hear about hyper-Calvinism and some Christians do confuse the sovereignty of God with a kind of fatalistic point of view. There are dangers, aren't there with this doctrine?

JOHN: Well, they are the obvious dangers. And these are the dangers that turn into the criticisms by the Arminian people and we've sort of talked around these things already. You know, I don't need to witness to people. You know, I don't need to live a certain kind of holy life. You know, I don't need to manifest righteousness to show a transformed life because God's going to save who He's going to save. Hyper-Calvinism would be the view that we shouldn't even preach the gospel to everybody, we shouldn't give an open universal call, that's illegitimate because, you know, we're wasting our time. We're offering something to people that they can't accept, so it's a false offer. It's presumptive. Yeah, there have been all kinds of wrong responses to this doctrine.

But I think the most typical wrong response to the doctrine of sovereign...or the sovereignty of God in salvation is indifference.

PHIL: Humph.

JOHN: Indifference toward ministry, indifference toward godliness, indifference toward evangelism.

PHIL: And so the answer to that would be just to continually feed our minds with what Scripture teaches about this doctrine so that we stay balanced.

JOHN: Absolutely.

PHIL: Let me give you some Scripture references that teach the sovereignty of God or deal with the issue and let you comment individually on these. And, in fact, let's start with one from Isaiah that talks about the decree of God, the eternal purpose of God. Isaiah 46 verses 9 and 10. God speaking says, "I am God and there is no other. I am God and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the

beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand and I will accomplish all My purpose.'"

JOHN: I think that's my favorite verse on the sovereignty of God. I mean...

PHIL: Kind of hard to get around that one.

JOHN: It shuts down every argument and I think the definitive statement there is, "I am God and there is no other." In other words, there's not any competition for who's in charge. You know, this idea that God is fighting Satan all the time and sometimes Satan wins and sometimes God wins and sometimes Satan comes in and kills your kids and gives you cancer and God is scrambling to try to counter Satan. That is just a horrendous misrepresentation of the reality. And so that verse starts out...I am God and nobody else, or no other being is God...which means I don't have any competition. I'm absolutely and thoroughly in charge.

And then I love the next line that...I have determined the end at the beginning. I mean, the end is already determined. I determined the end at the beginning, which is to say that whatever God purposes is what will happen. That's what will happen. So whatever happens is what He purposed to happen. You're a believer, I'm a believer, that's the end, in a personal sense, but it is the end because it was the purpose, the beginning. God determined that when He laid out the plan. So I just think it's so important to understand that there's no competition with God. There's no competitor for God...not man, not demons, not Satan.

PHIL: Yeah, in recent years there's been this, I would call it a heresy, known as Open Heresy.

JOHN: Yeah, Open Theism that God...God doesn't know the future, that He doesn't know the end from the beginning, didn't plan the end from the beginning. And He's scrambling around trying to react.

And by the way, that entire theology, as heretical as it is, came into existence to get God off the hook for evil. I mean, it's a Johnny-come-lately notion concocted by some guys because they didn't want God to be responsible for the way things were in the world.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: And so they're trying to divest God of a responsibility that He's perfectly willing to accept.

PHIL: Yeah, I've often said you have to give the Open Theists at least some credit for their consistency because they start with a notion that God is not sovereign and that is what it takes you to, the idea that God doesn't even know what's going to happen in the future.

JOHN: Right. In fact, they would go so far as to say no one knows what's going to happen in the future because nothing has happened in the future and therefore God can't know what hasn't happened because it hasn't happened. That is a horrendous view of God.

When you say it's a heresy, I would say it borders on such a severe heresy as to perhaps have a God other than the true God, and that would be frightening because in Hebrews 11:6 it says, "He that comes to Him must believe that He is." What do you mean? That He is who He is. And if you have...we would say you can't be a Christian if you have a wrong view of Christ, can you be a Christian if you have a completely wrong view of God?

PHIL: I would say no.

JOHN: Yeah.

Yeah, in fact, it's impossible to reconcile that with this text from Isaiah 46. Here, another verse from James 4, this is that familiar passage where James writes and sort of rebukes people for saying, "Today or tomorrow, I'm going to go such-and-such a place and so such-a-such a thing." And he says in James 4:15, "You ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or do that.'" Isn't James expressly affirming the sovereignty of God?

JOHN: I don't know that it could be any more clear. He says, "You can't even say you're going to live outside the purpose of God." Right?

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: We ought to say, "We will live if it's within the purpose of God and do this and that." You know, that takes the whole lofty sort of esoteric discussion about the sovereignty of God down to my life today...I'm going to go here, I'm going to do that. Oh really? You ought to say, "If God wills, I'm going to do this and that." And I think what that does is take the sovereignty of God down to the individual activities of every single person, it all fits in to His purpose.

PHIL: Yeah, James seems to be rebuking people in that context for careless speech. But he says it's wrong, and it's a serious problem because it fails to acknowledge the sovereignty of God.

JOHN: Right.

PHIL: Yeah, all right, another text and let me preface this by saying, there are people who would say, "Okay, well God is sovereign to a point, but He doesn't control random happenings. There are things that happen randomly." Here's a text that seems to say otherwise. Proverbs 16:33, and you can explain this one for us. "The lot is cast into the lap but its every decision is from the Lord."

JOHN: (Laughing) They used to draw lots to try to quote/unquote randomly determine something. That was a kind of fashion, like throwing dice, like any other form of chance, assuming that, you know, this was some random chance event. But the Proverbs are saying what you think is purely random, what you think is purely chance has been predetermined by the Lord. He's in charge of all of that.

You know, I would go so far as to say chance doesn't exist...it doesn't exist. It's non-existent. Think about this, I would say chance doesn't exist in even the simple things like casting lots and yet the humanistic view of the world and the universe is that the entire universe exists as a product of chance; when chance doesn't exist. Chance is not a power. If you ever use the word, it's only a word that accommodates ignorance. If you say, "Oh, that happened by chance," that's only because you're ignorant of why it really happened. So that verse is simply eliminating the fact that there are any random events, even something as simple as drawing straws.

PHIL: Jesus seem to say that, too, that nothing is really random when He said, "The hairs on your head are numbered," and even when a sparrow falls, He says it doesn't happen apart from the Father.

JOHN: By the way, that verb "falls" is probably the verb for "hops." So He not only knows when they die, He knows when they hop.

PHIL: And it isn't just saying He knows it, either, is it? He's...He determines these things.

JOHN: Right. There is no difference between what God knows, what God allows and what God determines.

PHIL: And a verse I quoted earlier, Proverbs 21 verse 1, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord, He turns it wherever He will."

JOHN: Yeah, it is. It doesn't mean that God is pleased with decisions that are made, but what it does mean is that they are never outside His control.

PHIL: And He's directing it toward His chosen purpose.

JOHN: That to me is the amazing reality. We talk about the providence of God. I understand miracles. I understand God interrupting history, making an axe head float, making a dead person rise, you know, dividing the sea in the Old Testament, or all the miracles in the New Testament. Those are easy to understand. You just stop the natural processes and invade with the supernatural power. But what to me is more miraculous than miracles is providence, how God takes all these contingencies in the millions and billions and trillions of actions of people and events and weaves that all together

perfectly in His plan.

PHIL: Now the verse I quoted talks about the king's heart, Proverbs 16:9 says the very same truth really applies to all of us, it says, "The heart of man plans his way..."

JOHN: But the Lord directs his steps."

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: Yeah.

PHIL: You finished it for me.

JOHN: Yeah, well, because I've said it many times. We make our plans and the Lord directs our steps. You know, you might say, "Wow, that sounds like...that sounds like some kind of intrusion." I can't think of anything more wonderful than that because I would much rather trust the Lord with my life than trust my life to myself. So I thinkChristian people need to get to the point where instead of seeing the sovereignty of God as some kind of intrusion, or some kind of impossible thing to explain, they need to see the sovereignty of God as the most encouraging, hopeful, blessed of all realities that you're never able to drift from His control, which is driving you to the purpose. That's back to Romans 8:28.

PHIL: Yeah, I was going to say, that's the next verse I was going to bring up because it goes exactly with what you're saying.

JOHN: Yeah, He works all things together for good.

PHIL: Probably the most blessed and favorite promise in all of Scripture and you can't really claim that promise, you can't really believe that promise without acknowledging the sovereignty of God.

JOHN: It's an impossible thing to say that God works all things together for your good if you don't believe God is sovereign. A God who is not sovereign can't do that. A God who doesn't know the future can't do that.

PHIL: Yeah, you mentioned Joseph earlier, you remember what it was he said to his brothers.

JOHN: "You meant it for evil, and God meant it for good."

PHIL: So God had a plan in it. Even though from the human perspective, it was evil. They meant it for evil.

JOHN: Right.

PHIL: God had a plan that was good and He used it for good.

JOHN: You know, as a pastor and you as a pastor as well, Phil, how many times a month, or how many times a week do we tell people that in this evil God has a good plan? Last week I told you about the little three year old, I'm at the hospital in the children's ward with mask on, and gloves cause I can't go in without it and we're talking about that with two parents of a three year old,...a couple of days later I'm in a cancer bed and a 33 year-old mother...by the way, this lady came to our church at the age of 15, came to Christ, grew in Christ, met a man, married him, they had four children. She's 33 years old and she's virtually dead of cancer at 33 and I walked in the room and I had knee surgery recently, the first thing out of her mouth, she's got tubes and wires and it's horrendous, she says, "Oh, John, how's your knee?" She's asking me how my knee...and we began to talk and there's literally joy in her heart because as horrible as it is, young wife, young mother, four children about to be motherless and she's going through the ravages of this cancer, and what's the conversation going to be about? "Oh I'm so sorry Satan did this to you?" Is that what we're going to say? Or, "I'm so sorry this randomly happened to you. Maybe God can make something out of this mess." That's not what she believes.

Her confident faith was God has a purpose in this and I rejoice in His purpose. You can live there. And again we're back to the folks who came to the church and said, "We can't live under the sovereignty of Satan."

PHIL: Yeah. Now, in Joseph's case, he's saying this not about a disease that happened to him but an evil act that his brothers had done to him, and I think a lot of people sort of choke at that point. You know, how could the evil things that somebody does to me with evil intention, how can God have a plan in that that's good?

JOHN: Well that's a pretty...pretty limited view of God to think that...and that's sort of maybe overestimates your own importance?

PHIL: Yeah, I would say the answer to it is the cross.

JOHN: Yeah, of course...of course.

PHIL: Here is the most evil act ever perpetrated by the hands of evil men...

JOHN: Sure...perpetrated against the most innocent and righteous person who ever lived...

PHIL: And yet...here's how Scripture says it, "This man delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death," Acts 2:23.

JOHN: I love the testimony additionally of Stephen who is being, you know, unjustly crushed beneath the bloody stones and he says, you know, what his Savior said on the cross, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." And Stephen says, "Lay not this sin to their charge." That's the right response because Stephen knows that God is going to work this to His good, he even begins to see a glimpse of Christ waiting for him in glory.

PHIL: And then the New Testament parallel to that verse we started with in Isaiah would be Ephesians 1:11 which says, "God works all things after the counsel of His own will."

JOHN: Yeah, a great verse.

PHIL: Now let me go back to something you said earlier, which is...has to do with the dangers of maybe an overemphasis on the sovereignty of God or a skewed view of the sovereignty of God. And you mentioned that if we're not careful, we can look at this doctrine in a way that makes us too passive, or lacking in empathy. Is there a tendency for people who stress this doctrine to be like Job's counselors? You know, your grandma died, your marriage is failing, you lost your job...well buck up, God is sovereign, all things work together...how do we affirm these truths to someone who is suffering without maybe being too flippant about it?

JOHN: You know, I think the great compelling illustration of how we deal with people who suffer, is Jesus. And I've said this through the years in my teaching that when the Lord Jesus came into the world, He could have done all kinds of things to demonstrate His deity. He could have flown. He could have said "house" and there could have been a house. He could have said "mountain," and there would have been a mountain. Or He could have...He could have done a myriad of things. Well what did He do?

He basically healed people. He...I always say...He banished illness from Israel for the duration of His ministry, and He delivered people from demon possession. What was that saying? You know, He looked on the masses with compassion. Did He know that all things were within the sovereign purpose of God? Absolutely. Did He weep over the city of Jerusalem? Absolutely. Did He weep over the grave of Lazarus? Yes He did. And He demonstrated this...this relentless compassion toward all these hurting suffering people, so much so that Paul refers to Him as being marked by compassion.

And I think, you know, I think that's the thing that we should seek as the very compassion and tenderness of Christ toward those who are hurting. And I think the New Testament would even call us to that kind of love toward one another, to that kind of compassion, to that kind of ministry to the

suffering and the weak and all of those kinds of things...that's pretty well laid out as part of New Testament ministry, New Testament life.

So I think, for me, no one understood the sovereignty of God better than the Lord Jesus did. He understood it perfectly. And yet to all the people who came across His path, who suffered, He demonstrated this continual compassion and even went to the degree where He relieved them of those immediate issues that caused them to suffer. And that, I think, is the heart of God.

PHIL: That's a good note on which to end this conversation. Thanks for your time, John, and thanks for, as you always do, shedding biblical light on difficult questions like this for us. We're grateful for your faithfulness and your wisdom and thanks for sharing this time with us.

JOHN: Well, Phil, thank you very much for all of your input and your insights and we can do the best we can to understand these things and leave the rest to that time when we shall know as we are known.

PHIL: Amen.

Available online at: <http://www.gtycanada.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2012 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).