

# Human Struggle and Divine Sovereignty

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This article is my answer to a Christian who wrote to me about some struggles he has been experiencing in association with his belief in the doctrine of divine sovereignty. The precise nature of his problem will become evident once you begin reading, so I will not take time to summarize or explain it here.

I begin by presenting an altered version of what he wrote to me. The changes include the following:

1. I have combined paragraphs from three messages into one. Only eight sentences were taken from the first and the third, and attached to the beginning and the end of the second message.
2. I have excluded several small sections. These consist of comments and details that do not affect the meaning and the thrust of his message, and my reply does not refer to them directly.
3. I have changed the personal information included in the original messages, such as the names of this person and his wife. This is done to protect their privacy. Since this person's spiritual struggles and the events in his life are not unique, it seems unnecessary to alter other aspects of his message.

One other relevant piece of information is that this person had already received competent counsel from a pastor on this matter, but he would say at every point, "Yes, but God determines everything," "If God wills, then I will do this thing that I ought to do," or "If God wills, then he will change this in my life, so why doesn't he?" It is with this kind of mentality that he wrote to me.

Vincent,

I need to talk to someone who will understand what I am going through presently. In short, I am overwhelmed by the reality of God's sovereignty. Now, let me try and explain what that means.

First of all, I completely embrace the truth that God is sovereign over all things, everywhere, at all times. He controls the thoughts of men, the actions of men, and every single thing that happens in this world since before time ever was as we know it. He is all in all. This, as a theological reality, is something I have no problem acknowledging and embracing as a truth.

My wife cannot have children. I say this knowing that God is sovereign over the womb. So if He has so foreordained that Jill has children, then she will do so. But from a medical perspective, the reality is that she cannot have children. She has the strongest of desires for a big family. She weeps at night. I lay awake at night holding my wife as she cries over the fact that she cannot have children. And as I lay there I consider the countless little girls, teenage girls, and women who have abortions, throw babies into dumpsters, or simply neglect their children and I think...how can this be?

Now, someone will say, "Jack, God works all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose." I can acknowledge this as a theological reality. But it doesn't help when you feel your wife shaking with grief and pain. Someone will say, "Jack, you just need to trust the Lord and be obedient to Him regardless of emotion." I can agree with this as well. It still does not help alleviate the intense frustration, pain, and sorrow. And at the end of the day I think to myself, "God is sovereign. He could cause Jill to bear children. All of this could stop."

In addition to this, I cannot escape patterns of sin in my life. Brother, I know that with God all things are possible. And I also know that we are exhorted in the Scriptures to flee from sin and cling to the precepts of our Lord. And yet I find myself falling back into old patterns of sin at times in my life. So I fight for freedom. I tell someone whatever it is that is going on, i.e. thinking about my past, dealing with the lust of the eyes, and so forth. I have someone hold me accountable. I put forth extra effort to meditate upon the things of the Lord. And yet the inward battle never subsides. It is day in and day out, it seems. Once again I think to myself, "God is sovereign – totally and completely. Why does He not remove this pathetic sickness from me once and for all!"

Yes, positionally I am in Christ, and Christ is in me. I am washed clean by the blood of the spotless Lamb. And I can also acknowledge that even the foreordination of my sinfulness glorifies God in His grand plan. But Vincent, I absolutely detest sin in myself. I do not want sin in my life any longer. So the reality of what God could do, but does not do, is hard for me to deal with.

A third thing that plagues my thoughts is the Church. It breaks my heart to see the things that I see within the Body. I read in the Scriptures what the Body is supposed to be, how She is supposed to act, and what the will of the Lord is for His precious Bride. Yet I look around me, see the things I see on television, and glance through the racks of books on the shelves of the local Christian bookstore and I think, "Father, why?" And so again I find myself wondering why all of this has been ordained (not allowed) to happen.

I don't deem myself so grand that God would owe me an answer. He does not owe me anything. I do not think myself so wise as to assume I should have an answer. Quite honestly I do not assume or think anything at all. I just find myself in a very bad place because of the nonstop roller-coaster of thinking that goes on. It is relentless.

Brother, I am tired. I am so very tired. I no longer want to pray. I think, why do it? Yes, I may be praying concurrently with the will of God, but in the grand scheme of things what does this really matter? Does my prayer change anything? I cannot believe that it does. What God has ordained IS going to happen, regardless of whether or not I pray. And if I do not pray, isn't that non prayer ordained? If I pray, isn't that ordained?

I agree also that my need right now is the ability to simply apply the truth rather than just having a knowledge of it. The irony of it is that the ability to simply apply the truth is under the control of the sovereignty of our Lord. So if He wills it, then I will do it.

Jack

Jack,

As I mentioned, since your difficulty requires not only informing you of the right doctrines, but leading you to believe and apply them aright, my usual prescription would entail a program of extensive sessions of counseling for spiritual assessment and for radical realignment of the mind to conform to biblical teachings.

However, since this is not possible at this time, a written response will have to suffice. That said, given your condition, a very short answer might be only a little better than none at all. Therefore, although I intended to provide a simple reply at first, I have since decided that a full-length article is needed.

## **Introduction**

I must begin with an explanation of my approach. This will help you understand my concerns and motives as I write my answer to you. This section is indispensable, since it will prepare you to understand and perhaps even accept what I will say to you in the body of my reply. So please give it the same attention that you will to the rest of the article. In fact, if you have ears to hear, this introductory section would be sufficient to deliver you, but I will give you more.

Although I cannot agree with your thinking, I initially resolved to construct an answer so characterized with gentleness that you would be moved to the truth by the show of compassion. However, because of your current pattern of thinking, I soon realized that anything other than a head-on confrontation with it would only be met with more of the same: "Yes, you are right, and I will do it if God causes me to," "Yes, I agree, and it is now up to God to make me this way," and similar statements. Because you claim to be familiar with some of my writings on the subject of divine sovereignty, I cannot assume that a gentle reminder of the same would make a difference, especially since it seems that others have already tried to do this. Our correspondence would then be a waste of my time and effort, and more importantly, it would reinforce your desperation and hopelessness, as well as your unbelief and rebellion.

As I pondered this matter, the Lord abolished my resolve to hold back a full display of your error for the sake of comfort and amiability; instead, "his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" (Jeremiah 20:9, KJV). He is against the false prophets who lead people astray, who proclaim "peace" to one who feeds them, and wage war against one who does not. The Scripture says concerning them, "They will all cover their faces because there is no answer from God" – they do not have the answer that you seek. "But as for me, I am

filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin" (Micah 3:5-8).

Scripture instructs us to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Under the tutelage of Satan, many Christians have reduced this love to mean the use of nonabrasive words spoken in an effeminate tone, although in their hypocrisy, they would lash out at anyone who thinks that love means something else. The verse is telling us to speak the truth to people because we love them, and not that we should do it in such a feeble manner that we might as well not say anything. Indeed, in helping people to become "sound in the faith," sometimes we must "rebuke them sharply" (Titus 1:13). The false interpretation of Ephesians 4:15 would render it unacceptable to practice Titus 1:13 on any occasion – it would make the Bible contradict itself. Thus biblical inerrancy itself is compromised when Christians adopt the world's idea of love and hold it as a nonnegotiable definition in exegesis.

"Better is open rebuke than hidden love" (Proverbs 27:5). Love is bold to speak the truth in open rebuke for the benefit of someone who needs the correction. Each time I speak this way to a person, I risk losing his respect and support, but I will do it because I love him. "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18), so if I withhold correction from someone because I fear what he will think about me, then my love toward him is imperfect. But if my love toward this person is pure and strong, then I will speak the correction that he needs regardless of the possibility that his perception of me might change for the worse when he hears it.

We may take an analogy from Proverbs 13:24, which says, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." Love requires even the use of physical violence when it comes to parenting. If we are ashamed of God, he will be ashamed of us (Mark 8:38). So let us not make some artificial distinction between discipline and violence in this context. It is discipline by the use of controlled violence against the body. God says that if you refuse to do this, then it is evidence that you hate your child.

Likewise, those who reduce love to something akin to social courtesy in fact hate those that they claim to love and to help. Their definition permits them to replace love with mere politeness so that they can feel like they are good and compassionate people without possessing the genuine spiritual virtue, and without risking the loss of resource, respect, and reputation that comes with the exercise of self-sacrificial love. These people love only themselves. Their false definition of love produces a façade that covers up their hatred against God and other people. This devious method generates a confusion that allows them to live in hate but boast of love.

I have never wrestled with the problems that you struggle with. Until I witnessed it in Christians, it never occurred to me that anyone would take the attitude with God that you currently hold. I knew better even before I was converted. And I thank God that he has never allowed me to blaspheme him whether in thought or in speech, and whether by assertion or implication, the way that you blaspheme him now.

However, just because I have never experienced your oppressed mental condition does not mean that I am unable to help you. In fact, I am in a very good position to deliver God's answer to you. You might find much of what I say harsh, offensive, and insulting. I will say that you are wrong in your attitude, that you are mistaken in your understanding. But this should be good news to you, since if your problem is due to your error, then there is something you can do about it. And given that there is a solution in God's word for every spiritual error, the fact you are in error is a basis for hope. If you are already perfect in every way, then there would be nothing that I can say to you. So my word of rebuke and correction should not incite anger or desperation in you, but expectation for positive change.

Human compassion is deceptive and impotent. When we set that up as the standard of judgment, even God will appear to lack sympathy. People cry, "The love of God! The love of God!" and resist my message because I refuse to submit to their humanistic idea of love, a definition that they have imposed on the Christian faith. But it is God who says to Jeremiah, "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?" (Jeremiah 12:5). This prophet was undergoing trials and confronting dangers that were much more serious than yours, but this was God's answer to him: "If you cannot even take this, what will happen to you when it gets worse?" Where is the compassion? If the Lord has any compassion, it is certainly not of the humanistic sort.

Likewise, Jesus expected his disciples to trust God even in the face of a life-threatening storm, so that when they were fearful, he rebuked them, saying, "Where is your faith?" (Luke 8:25). Where is the sympathy? Where is the gentleness? But Jesus is nothing like the effeminate preacher that many believers proclaim. They worship an idol of their own creation, an offspring of a marriage between biblical and heathen thought. Of course I will not submit to such a thing, but I will condemn it with confidence and authority, in the name and spirit of Christ, with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me (Colossians 1:29). Contemporary Christians disapprove because they have been taught by the traditions of man and not by the doctrines of God. They do not know him, and they judge his methods and his servants by the evil standards of this world.

Even if I were to stop here, I would have already answered all the points that you raised. That is, Jeremiah 12:5 and Luke 8:25 should be more than sufficient, and many people would not get more than this from the Lord. Indeed, this would be enough to satisfy some people, those who submit and respond to even the smallest revelation from heaven as their most prized treasure. These are they who do not say, "Why doesn't God do it this way? Why do I have to put up with this? Why does he cause this or that? I know he can change this if he wants to, so why doesn't he?" All this comes from the spirit of unbelief and rebellion.

Perhaps you will say to me, "But you do not understand what I am going through." Well! You do not understand what Jeremiah was going through, either, and his problems were



much worse than yours. Yet God reprimanded him, and called him to a stronger faith. And you are not facing, as the disciples were, a fierce storm that threatens to take you life in a few minutes time. Yet Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith. So guess what God's attitude is toward you right now?

In any case, I do not need to understand what you are going through, because Jesus understands what you are going through, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). You are the one who will have to live with the consequences of making more excuses. I am happy and satisfied in the Lord, and I can show you how to attain the same thing, if you will listen. Rather than making excuses and putting up resistance, it is better to pray for ears to hear, and accept what truth there is in what I now bring to you.

I admit that I lack a complete perspective on your situation. I am aware of my lack of information. But I am not ignorant of God's word, and I am not ignorant of what you said to me, although I assume you told me only a little about what is on your mind and what is happening in your life. So, if you can believe me, I am less judgmental of you than I appear, but I am responding to what you said, the way you said it, and the implications of these two. And just as Paul writes, "I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed'" (1 Corinthians 12:3), one who is speaking by the Holy Spirit will not dare speak or imply some of the things that you have said. Accordingly, one who is speaking by the Spirit of God can never condone them.

There is one who judges you, but I am not the one. So even if it seems that I have misunderstood you in what follows, even if you insist that you are not as bad as I make you appear, there is no need to defend yourself to me. I am certain that I am essentially correct in my assessment, since it takes a certain kind of sinful mentality to entertain some of the thoughts that you revealed to me. It is not that your faults are unique, but just because they are common does not make them any less evil. It is rather alarming that more than a few professing believers think like you do, and this either results in their rejection of the biblical doctrine of divine sovereignty, or as in your case, in their turning the doctrine into an unbearable burden and a basis for blasphemy once they claim to have accepted it.

I will address the effects of your current way of thinking, and point out the assumptions behind the things that you said as well as their implications. You may deny that you intended these assumptions and implications, but you cannot deny their effects, since you are the one who shared them with me, and you cannot deny the assumptions and implications associated with them if the logical relationship is demonstrated. You might not be aware of all your intentions, but once their effects are made obvious, perhaps you will be moved to examine and admit to them.

I believe I am correct, or I would not be saying what I say to you. And I must describe the situation as severely as I perceive it; otherwise, I would not be telling you what I really think, and I would not be offering you the help that you asked for. In any case, whether

you consider my assessment correct or incorrect, in the end you are the one who has to live with the consequences of accepting or rejecting what I say.

Proceeding to the content of what you said to me, one notable characteristic common to the issues you raised is that I have already answered them in my writings. Our previous interactions had given me the impression that you had read and agreed with much of them, if not all. But if you had accepted them, you would have never raised these issues with me, or at least not in the way and in the form in which you stated them. So the possibilities are that you have never in fact read much of my works (so that you have never read the answers), that you have forgotten what you have read (so that all you need to do is to review), that you have never accepted them (although you have given no indication as to where you would disagree with me and your reason for the disagreement), and/or that you have failed to apply them when it comes to your own life and your own thinking (and it is strange and disappointing that there is no indication that you have applied my works to your problems to any extent).

As for that which disturbs you, a large part of it is nothing other than a variation of the so-called problem of evil. In its usual expression, this objection against Christianity has been answered long ago by me and at least a few others. I address it in my article, "The Problem of Evil." Among other things, I have shown that the objection itself is so incoherent that it is refuted even before we finish reading it. As an argument against the Christian faith, "If God, then why evil?" cannot be expressed in a manner that can be logically understood.

Your problem is not identical to the atheistic argument, but certain facets of it are the same. So if you will review the answer to it, you will see that all your questions make no sense. At some point an arbitrary premise is introduced, or an assumption is held without acknowledgement or justification. As with the problem, so is the solution. If the general problem is that your thinking makes no sense, then the general solution is that you should stop thinking this way. The solution is to stop your irrational thinking rather than to give you an answer that will satisfy it.

The same is true regarding your understanding and application of God's sovereignty. From our previous interactions, I know you agree that appeals to human freedom, to mystery, to apparent contradictions, or to compatibilism are all erroneous and misleading. These are false answers to the issues you raised. Nevertheless, if you had read and accepted my expositions on the subject, you would have never said the things that you said. The problem is not with God, but conflict and confusion occur because you hold some central assumptions and follow patterns of thinking that are unbiblical and irrational.

Besides having addressed the broad problem of evil, I have also given specific answers to each of the items you mentioned. Spread throughout my writings are answers to your problems with divine sovereignty and the relationship that the doctrine holds with specific issues in life. First, my expositions on divine sovereignty are more than enough to address your wife's condition, including your duty as a husband. You can be sure that

the response of a loving husband – one who truly loves God and loves his wife – is not to say to God that he can change it but does not. My *Biblical Healing* is a supplement to the expositions on divine sovereignty, applying it to human infirmities. Then, in several places I have addressed the reason for the divine decree for the existence of false doctrines and practices in the church, and for false religions and cults. And I addressed the topic again recently in my article, "The Invincible Church." As for the meaningfulness of prayer given the fact of divine sovereignty, I have addressed this in my *Prayer and Revelation*, as well as in several other places. You should review these works, as well as those writings that gives special attention to divine sovereignty, such as my *Commentary on Ephesians* and *The Author of Sin*.

In what follows I will avoid telling you, "You should already know this. You should already know this." I will say it here, and then I will not to repeat it too often. Indeed, if you had been paying attention, then all your questions should have been answered a long time ago, and you would be helping others rather than needing help yourself. There is a place to say, "I do not have the answer, but I will pray with you." But this is not for me to say, because I do have the answer – all of it. I have the answer because God's word has the answer, and in what follows I will give it to you again. You might respond as you said about a verse of Scripture, "I can acknowledge this as a theological reality. But it doesn't help when you feel your wife shaking with grief and pain." I am not deceived by this pious talk, and I will answer it in a moment. For now also note that the answer might not "help" not only because you have what you consider compassion toward your wife, but it will also fail to "help" if you have an evil heart of unbelief, refusing to combine the word of God with faith (Hebrews 4:2).

So you might not like the answer I am about to give you. This introduction alone might be more than you can take. But it is my responsibility to present the answer, not to make you like it. And I have the answer. I have it right here. This is it. It will deliver you if you will listen. You can accept it and live a joyful and productive life in God, or reject it and perish in your unbelief and despair. You might say, "I will listen if it is God's will, for he foreordains all things." I will answer even this ungodly excuse – in itself the statement is true, but you say it in a manner and in a context that it is used as an excuse for wickedness and rebellion.

Even though I speak this way, I wish you to know that I care about you. I am for you, not against you. But that I am for you means that I must give you God's word on the matter, and not what will make you feel better at the expense of God's truth and honor. I could dismiss you with a few sentences, or refer you to my writings, and I would have given you a true answer. But I have not done that, so that the length of this answer is itself a testimony to the fact that I care about you. Nevertheless, it could be even longer, since there are many things that I can say, but I cannot say them all so that I must be selective. From my perspective – that is, compared to all that I can say about each item – I will barely touch on each point before proceeding to the next one. So I urge you to think on these things, and the Lord will make up the deficiency and give you understanding (2 Timothy 2:7).

This introduction concludes with a warning. I will give you God's answer in what follows. Insofar as what I say comes from and accords with God's revelation, your response to it is also your response toward God himself. And this means that you cannot remain unaffected by it. If you harden your heart and refuse to accept the answer, your condition will take a fast turn for the worse. At the least it will expose the wickedness that is already in your heart, so that you can pretend no longer. And if you remain in your current rebellion, it will have to be much more deliberate than before. As 2 Peter 2:21 says, "It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them."

On a personal level, my answer to you might destroy our relationship. It could be that I will become your enemy by telling you the truth (Galatians 4:16). However, my first concern is with God's honor. Your attitude and thinking dishonor the Lord, so that it is necessary for my answer to include a strong element of rebuke and correction. It is with much compassion toward you that I write the following, but I write with much more jealousy for God's honor, that his name and his doctrine be not blasphemed or made into objects of mockery and scorn. So with this in mind, I am not afraid of offending you. You can do nothing to hurt me, nothing that matters. And this is your problem, your life. I know I risk losing your respect, support, and friendship, but these things are completely worthless to me compared to the pleasure of God and the vindication of his name.

## **Human Infirmary and Divine Sovereignty**

About your wife's condition, you wrote, "My wife cannot have children. I say this knowing that God is sovereign over the womb. So if He has so foreordained that Jill has children, then she will do so." This is correct as far as it goes, or when taken by itself. But the latter part of the paragraph suggests that there is a false attitude behind it. We will deal with that directly in a moment, but since I cannot assume that your attitude behind this first part is correct, I must mention a few things.

First, does the Bible prescribe this reaction, this attitude? You have stated the metaphysical truth behind the situation, but you have also taken it as your stance toward the situation as a Christian. Are there biblical precepts telling you how to react in some other way?

You have taken God's decree – not the decree itself, since that is not known, but the principle that things occur by God's decree – as the basis and content of your reaction. But the Bible says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29). God revealed his law for you to follow, but your attitude toward the situation appeals to his secret decree. You apply the principle of divine sovereignty to every item that you mentioned to me, but the above only begins to show that your understanding of the doctrine is defective and unbiblical. You cannot trust your

application of it. You either refuse to apply it correctly – I will offer some possible reasons for this – or you do not know how in the first place, although I have taught this over and over again.

One of the many precepts that apply to this situation is persistent prayer (Luke 18:1-8). Jesus says, "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (v. 7-8). The question is not God's justice, as the latter part of your paragraph indirectly alleges, but whether you have any faith at all (or as implied in verse 7, whether you are even one of his chosen ones). And according to the passage, if you have faith, you would persist in prayer. Have you been persisting in prayer? Apparently not, or you would not speak this way about the situation.

How have you been praying for your wife? If you have been saying to God what you said to me, then the best gift he could give you is a strong rebuke – much like what I am giving you now. God answers prayer for healing. As Genesis 25:21 says, "Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant." But as it is, your soul is as barren as your wife's womb.

You continued, "I lay awake at night holding my wife as she cries over the fact that she cannot have children. And as I lay there I consider the countless little girls, teenage girls, and women who have abortions, throw babies into dumpsters, or simply neglect their children and I think...how can this be?"

Wait a minute, you present yourself as someone who makes a pervasive application of God's sovereignty over all things, but here you make a comparison between you and these other people based on God's precepts. You rightly judge their behavior as sinful, but you can only do that by using God's precepts as the reference point for your thinking. And you judge your own intention as non-sinful, if not even noble, but again, you can only do that by using God's precepts as the reference point.

Then you lament, "How can this be?" Since the comparison is based on God's moral principles, and since by this reference point these people are morally inferior to you, and since you affirm that whether someone can have children is based on God's sovereignty, it necessarily means that your frustration is based on your belief that you *deserve* better treatment from God than what you have been getting. You think that God sovereignly gives to sinners what he should give to you. You question him on the basis that you are better than these other people.

This reeks of self-righteousness. You are like the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son. He says, "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered

your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" (Luke 15:28-30).

The story does not correspond exactly to your situation, but it would if these sinners you talk about repent and come to Christ. And those who do will probably have a better attitude than you do about life and about God. As it is, whether these other people repent, you sound just like the self-righteous brother: "Look! I desire children and intend to raise them well, but you refuse to grant me any. But these sinners squander their ability to have children, even abandoning them and killing them, yet you bless them with fertility! How can this be?"

When I mentioned that you should apply the truth, you replied, "The irony of it is that the ability to simply apply the truth is under the control of the sovereignty of our Lord. So if He wills it, then I will do it." But you did not say that about these sinners, did you? Hey, did you? You judge them by appealing to God's precept, but excuse yourself by appealing to God's decree. Do you see it? You are a hypocrite. Now if you also judge them by God's decree, then your comparison is destroyed, and you can no longer ask, "How can this be?" And if you also judge yourself by God's precepts, as you judge these sinners, then you can no longer excuse yourself from obeying these precepts by appealing to God's sovereignty.

You complain that others have what you do not have, but are you thankful for what you already have? If you are, there is no indication of it in what you said to me. With such a bad attitude, what would you do if you had children? Would you pass on your resentful and self-righteous attitude to them? Would it be altogether unreasonable to wonder if these children are better off dead, as those born to the sinners, than to be raised by someone like you? But I will spare you this point.

What I will not spare you of, on the other hand, is the question of whether you have been a good husband, since you are already one. Do you even love your wife? Of course you think you do, but does this love result in rebellion, resentment, and disagreement against God? Or does this love result in an earnest call for your wife to follow after God's teachings? Does this love compel you to fill your wife with faith, with love, with hope? Does this love compel you to affirm God's goodness to your wife? Or have you been telling her what you said to me, and filling her heart with the same bitter hypocrisy and self-righteousness? Do you defend her against God, or do you defend God before her? If the latter, do you do it sincerely? If so, then why do you even need to talk to me, unless you do not mean what you say?

Laying aside for the moment the possibility of healing through prayer, what if God has something different or better for you and your wife? What if it is merely a matter of time? What if he wants you to abandon the desire to have your own biological children so that you can adopt those who have been abandoned, or otherwise would have been killed, or raised as sinners and criminals? What if he wants you to be part of the solution for these sinners that you have been complaining about? What if he wants you to give up having children so that you could spend more time in ministry, and in bringing up spiritual

children? Or is the justice of the situation measured only by what you and your wife desire?

Can you not pass this simple test of faith? How about your attitude toward the test itself? Do you value it or despise it? Job says, "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). Do you want that, or do you want children? Do you want that for your wife, or do you just want her to be pleased and complacent? Then, James tells us, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4). Do you want a faith that is genuine and tested? Do you want perseverance? Do you want spiritual maturity and fullness in God? Or do you want God to just hand over what you want so that you can be happy without having to undergo tests and trials? Yes, you claim to believe in God's absolute sovereignty. Your problem is that you disagree with how he uses it. But that makes you no better than Satan (James 2:19). You claim to perceive divine sovereignty as a reality, but your complaints show that you dislike it. You want to have things your way.

Awake! Listen! Humble yourself and pay attention, and you will have your answer. Here is God's word to you (Psalm 73, emphasis added):

Surely God is good to Israel,  
to those who are pure in heart.

**But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;  
I had nearly lost my foothold.  
For I envied the arrogant  
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.**

They have no struggles;  
their bodies are healthy and strong.  
They are free from the burdens common to man;  
they are not plagued by human ills.  
Therefore pride is their necklace;  
they clothe themselves with violence.  
From their callous hearts comes iniquity;  
the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.  
They scoff, and speak with malice;  
in their arrogance they threaten oppression.  
Their mouths lay claim to heaven,  
and their tongues take possession of the earth.  
Therefore their people turn to them  
and drink up waters in abundance.  
They say, "How can God know?  
Does the Most High have knowledge?"

This is what the wicked are like –  
always carefree, they increase in wealth.

Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure;  
in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.  
All day long I have been plagued;  
I have been punished every morning.

If I had said, "I will speak thus,"  
I would have betrayed your children.  
**When I tried to understand all this,  
it was oppressive to me  
till I entered the sanctuary of God;  
then I understood their final destiny.**

**Surely you place them on slippery ground;  
you cast them down to ruin.**  
How suddenly are they destroyed,  
completely swept away by terrors!

As a dream when one awakes,  
so when you arise, O Lord,  
you will despise them as fantasies.

**When my heart was grieved  
and my spirit embittered,  
I was senseless and ignorant;  
I was a brute beast before you.**

Yet I am always with you;  
you hold me by my right hand.  
You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will take me into glory.  
**Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.  
My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion forever.**

**Those who are far from you will perish;  
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.  
But as for me, it is good to be near God.  
I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge;  
I will tell of all your deeds.**



You are slipping because of the prosperity of the wicked (v. 2), but the truth is that God has placed them on slippery ground so that they will be destroyed (v. 18-19). When you are grieved and embittered by how God exercises his sovereignty (v. 21), then you are being senseless and ignorant, as a brute beast (v. 22). The question is whether you are numbered among the wicked in the first place. Can you say, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you" (v. 25)? If you are far from God and unfaithful to him, you will be destroyed (v. 27), but if God is the strength of your heart (v. 26), then you will say, "I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge" – not as you now say, "if he wills it, then I will do it." This is his word to one who is in your situation, one who is oppressed by thoughts concerning the prosperity of the wicked. How will you respond? Will you accept it without making excuses?

Then, you wrote, "Now, someone will say, 'Jack, God works all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.' I can acknowledge this as a theological reality. But it doesn't help when you feel your wife shaking with grief and pain." Why?! Why does it not help? As you should know, it is not just any "someone" who says this, but Paul wrote it down by the infallible inspiration of God.

If we turn to Romans 8 to observe the context, there is no reason why the verse should not help. Before the verse in question, Paul says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (v. 18). So he is talking about "our present sufferings." Verse 28 gives us the statement under discussion: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Then, he says, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (v. 31), and applies this in the face of trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, death, life, angels, demons, the present, the future, powers, height, depth, and "anything else in all creation" (v. 35, 38-39). And you have the gall to claim that you "acknowledge this" but "it doesn't help." Paul applies it to some very "present" (v. 18) problems like persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, or even the sword (v. 35). But in the face of your wife's shaking, "it doesn't help." That must be some strong tremor!

You are a liar (Romans 3:4). You do not in fact "acknowledge this as a theological reality." What you probably acknowledge is that you *ought to* "acknowledge this as a theological reality." You believe that you *ought to* believe it, but you do not in fact believe it. The other possibility is worse – it is that you do not love God, and that you are not called to his purpose. If you are an unbeliever, a non-Christian, then of course verse 28 does not help you. But this is between you and God. You claim to be a Christian, and for now I will treat you as such. Therefore, in the context of this discussion, there is no reason why verse 28 should not help you. What you say here is blasphemy against God's word, and it is pure rubbish.

Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12). Now imagine some idiot who says, "I acknowledge this as a

theological reality, but it doesn't help when people actually insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you." Well, why does Jesus say it then? It ought to help, because that is why he says it. He says that in the face of insult, persecution, and slander, we should "rejoice and be glad" – we have to *do it*, actually rejoice and be glad, and not just say we believe it but that it does not help. And rather than making excuses, the apostles did it: "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41).

Paul writes, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Now imagine some idiot who says, "I acknowledge this as a theological reality, but it doesn't help when you have done something wrong and you feel guilty about it." But it should help, because it is directly applicable to sin and guilt. If it does not help someone, then he does not in fact acknowledge it as a theological reality, or any kind of reality. Similarly, 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." He is a liar who says that he believes this but that it does not help.

When Paul pleaded with the Lord to remove from him a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan, the Lord replied, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). Now imagine if Paul had talked back to the Lord, "I acknowledge that as a theological reality, but it doesn't help when that thorn is poking at my side." He would be a moron. He would sound like you. But unlike you, he truly believed it and acted accordingly: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (v. 9-10).

Consider Joseph. He was betrayed by his own brothers and sold to a foreign land. Then he was falsely accused of a shameful crime and cast into prison. Now imagine if he had said, "I acknowledge my dream about my rise to power as a prophetic reality, but it doesn't help when you are rotting in a prison with no way out." If that had been his attitude, then in what sense did he acknowledge his dream as any kind of reality? He would have seen it as an unreality. But he was faithful and maintained a good attitude, and the Lord blessed him where he was. And all things indeed worked for his good. His brothers' betrayal sent him to the place where he would rise to power. And the false accusation against him, which sent him to prison, positioned him at the very place where he needed to be to gain Pharaoh's attention. Each tragedy was a shortcut to success and destiny.

Ah, but your problem is so great that all this does not help you. Pitiful! What has happened? You have deceived yourself: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22). You are a liar, and you have accepted your own lie.

Do I really need to deal with this other thing that you said? "Someone will say, 'Jack, you just need to trust the Lord and be obedient to Him regardless of emotion.' I can agree with this as well. It still does not help alleviate the intense frustration, pain, and sorrow. And at the end of the day I think to myself, 'God is sovereign. He could cause Jill to bear children. All of this could stop.'" Irreverent. Pathetic. No, you do not agree with it. You do not believe that you should trust the Lord and be obedient to him – or perhaps you believe that you *should*, as even the demons would, but like the demons you do not in fact trust and obey him; otherwise, it would indeed alleviate the frustration, pain, and sorrow.

You have the attitude, "God can end this suffering, but he does not." In other words, "God can obey me. God can bow to me and perform all my will, but he does not." And this frustrates you, causes you pain and sorrow. You may acknowledge it as a "theological reality" that he is God, and that he is sovereign, but you do not like it. You do not approve of what he does as God. You think he is withholding good things from you, but Jesus says, "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11). The only way that this can be a "theological reality" that "doesn't help" is if he is not your Father at all. There is not one thankful word in what you said to me about your situation. It is all about how God has wronged you. In comparison to your blasphemy, your wife's barrenness is the least of your problems.

## **Human Depravity and Divine Sovereignty**

Then you proceeded to talk about the battle with sin in your life, and how when considered in relation to the sovereignty of God on the matter, it leads to frustration. You wrote:

I cannot escape patterns of sin in my life. Brother, I know that with God all things are possible. And I also know that we are exhorted in the Scriptures to flee from sin and cling to the precepts of our Lord. And yet I find myself "falling" back into old patterns of sin at times in my life. So I fight for freedom. I tell someone whatever it is that is going on, i.e. thinking about my past, dealing with the lust of the eyes, and so forth. I have someone hold me accountable. I put forth extra effort to meditate upon the things of the Lord. And yet the inward battle never subsides. It is day in and day out, it seems. Once again I think to myself, "God is sovereign – totally and completely. Why does He not remove this pathetic sickness from me once and for all!"

Yes, positionally I am in Christ, and Christ is in me. I am washed clean by the blood of the spotless Lamb. And I can also acknowledge that even the foreordination of my sinfulness glorifies God in His grand plan. But Vincent, I absolutely detest sin in myself. I do not want sin in

my life any longer. So the reality of what God could do, but does not do, is hard for me to deal with.

The "difficulty" with this is that it is so easy for me to answer. Should I follow a logical outline that organizes my response by topic, or should I address what you say here with a chronological outline that organizes the principles and examples as they occurred throughout the history of salvation? Either arrangement could produce a book-length exposition, since there is so much about this in Scripture. I shall have to restrict myself to only a few points.

What is striking in what you wrote is that it is as if you have no understanding of God's sovereignty at all beyond the fact that he controls everything. As it is, it seems that you do not even like the doctrine – it makes your life miserable. But still you proceed to fake a comprehensive application of it – I did not say "make" but "fake," because your application is arbitrary rather than comprehensive, as demonstrated in the hypocrisy with which you judge some sinners who can bear children. One thing that you need to do is to face your pride and acknowledge that your understanding of this doctrine is in fact inferior, partial, and distorted.

You did mention that there is a "grand plan," and that even your sins and failures must be a part of it. But instead of integrating this into your application of divine sovereignty to generate a fuller perspective on the issue, you had only your tiny agenda in mind: "So the reality of what God could do, but does not do, is hard for me to deal with." What happened to the "reality" of the "grand plan"? It is not up to you to uphold or ignore an essential aspect of a biblical doctrine just because it is convenient for you at the moment or because you want to make a point.

This is especially relevant because you are so fond of asking "why." Does it have something to do with the "grand plan"? But you gave it no opportunity. "Why?" seems to be your consistent response to divine sovereignty, and your use of it is deceptive, perhaps unintentionally so. We understand that "why" can be a morally neutral adverb in a proposition that requests information or explanation. But it can also be used to indicate disapproval and impatience toward a certain state of affair. Sometimes both can be intended, and judging by the context of each section of what you wrote, this is the sense in which you use the word. It is not just a simple request for information, but a signal of your dissatisfaction with God's decisions and operations.

This is clear from the various ways in which you keep saying, "God can do this thing that I want, but he does not." The fact that your "why" indicates not only curiosity but also strong disapproval and rebellion is consistent with the way you tend to dismiss the solutions and explanations offered to you. So Romans 8:28 is dismissed because "it doesn't help" and his "grand plan" does not survive very long in your thinking, seemingly because it is not *your* grand plan. You do not want God to just inform you about what he does – in fact, it is questionable that you are very interested about this at all – but you want God to obey you in what he does.

The above is sufficient to show that you are not thinking correctly about all of this, and that your "why" toward God is sinful and senseless. But still, we will take a look at what the Bible says on the subject, as it answers the question directly and repeatedly:

But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Romans 9:20-24)

The question that Paul says we should not ask is precisely the one that you are asking: "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" If you are a reprobate, then the matter is simple. This passage says that God has made someone like you so that someone like me can learn about his wrath, his power, and his patience – that he would tolerate someone like you for so long – and in contrast, about his riches and mercy toward me. So if you are a reprobate, this would be a satisfying conclusion to my response.

However, our working assumption is that you are a Christian. Even so, the passage is relevant. Notice that God reveals himself to the elect not only through the objects of wrath, whom he has prepared for destruction, but those who are saved are objects of his *mercy* – they themselves have been sinners, only that God has decided to sovereignly show them mercy. "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Romans 9:18).

We may take the story of Samson as an example of how sin can fit into God's "grand plan." I will assume that even you know the Bible enough to remember that Samson made one mistake after another, sinning against some of God's universal moral precepts, as well as against the vow that he had kept before God. His sins culminated in his capture and humiliation, which led to the celebration that attracted the rulers of the Philistines (Judges 16:23). And in his last moments, Samson demonstrated a faith in God's mercy that is seldom witnessed in most Christians – he prayed for a restoration of his strength so that he may destroy the Philistines. But contrary to what some have been led to believe, Samson did not fail to accomplish what God had called him to do, for the Scripture says, "Thus he killed many more when he died than when he lived" (16:30). For his faith, he is honored along with the likes of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and Samuel (Hebrews 11:32).

I have learned from this, and have even written a short book about him. This great lesson concerning God's mercy is just one tiny aspect of the total revelation regarding how he

could make good use of sin in his "grand plan." But how your rebellion blinds your mind to this precious revelation!

How about the prophet Jonah? He sinned by disobeying God's instruction to preach to Ninevah (Jonah 1:3), but God sent a great fish to swallow him, so that he remained in it for three days and three nights (1:17). From within the great fish came a revelation and then a prayer that became a part of Scripture (2:2-9, emphasis added):

In my distress I called to the LORD,  
and he answered me.  
From the depths of the grave I called for help,  
and you listened to my cry.  
You hurled me into the deep,  
into the very heart of the seas,  
and the currents swirled about me;  
all your waves and breakers  
swept over me.  
**I said, "I have been banished  
from your sight;  
yet I will look again  
toward your holy temple."**  
The engulfing waters threatened me,  
the deep surrounded me;  
seaweed was wrapped around my head.  
To the roots of the mountains I sank down;  
the earth beneath barred me in forever.  
**But you brought my life up from the pit,  
O LORD my God.**

**When my life was ebbing away,  
I remembered you, LORD,  
and my prayer rose to you,  
to your holy temple.**

**Those who cling to worthless idols  
forfeit the grace that could be theirs.  
But I, with a song of thanksgiving,  
will sacrifice to you.**  
What I have vowed I will make good.  
Salvation comes from the LORD.

What a revelation of grace! Reading the passage almost moved me to tears, and would have done so, if I had not held back so that I could continue writing. And later the Lord Jesus even cited this incident as a sign corresponding to his own death and resurrection (Matthew 12:39-40). In contrast, all you can think about is, "God could do it for me, but he does not." These are but two of the many illustrations in Scripture that "Where sin

increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:20-21).

Whether a thought or action is sinful is determined by whether it transgresses God's precepts, so that even if God's decrees produce a good effect out of something evil, it does not change evil into good. Thus I do not say that these sins are not in fact wrong or evil just because God uses even the sins of men to glory himself and to fulfill his purpose. In fact, if they are not evil or if they are no longer evil once they are employed for good, then it destroys the very point that we are supposed to learn. For if the lesson consists of a revelation of God's wrath against sinners and God's mercy toward believers, then sin must remain sin; otherwise there would be no demonstration of wrath, and there would be no demonstration of mercy.

So we do not condone evil just because God makes good use of it. Rather, because he makes good use of it, we learn something about his wrath, his mercy, and the "grand plan" that you so despise. In your case, the struggle against those sins that you notice brings to the surface greater sins that you then fail to notice or refuse to acknowledge, such as resentment, rebellion, and blasphemy. You claim to detest sin in yourself. Good! Repent, purge away these wicked attitudes, and be thankful for the grace of God.

So I have told you the "why," but it is not really the "why" that you want, is it? If you cannot fool me, then still less can you fool God. It is not God's explanation that you want – if it is, I have just given it to you, although I could tell you much more – but it is his submission that you require. You say, "He could do it, but he does not. Why?" Answer me this: *Why* should he do it your way? Produce an answer and a justification for it. If you cannot say why he should do it your way, then what is the basis of your challenge? But if you can come up with a reason and defend it against him, then tell him about it, and perhaps he will admit that he has made a mistake with you and submit to your demand. As for me, I will praise his decrees and follow his precepts, for his mercy endures forever.

As for the practical aspect of how to combat sin, there are a number of books on the subject that you could acquire and study. You can read some John Owen, some J. C. Ryle, or more recent authors like Jerry Bridges, Joel Beeke, and Jay Adams. My own *Commentary on Philippians* contains a basic exposition on Paul's teaching regarding the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new man. You also mentioned the struggle that you have with legalism, and these books should address that as well. But I would insist that for now, your main gripe is not against your own sin, but against the Lord. Perhaps this is not obvious to you, because you would not like to think of yourself this way.

I would also remind you of the words of Jesus, who says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30). If your soul finds no rest, and if your faith is hard and heavy, it is not his yoke that you are carrying, and it is

not his teaching that you have learned. I am far from perfect myself, but I do not live under bondage and oppression, for the kingdom of God is "a matter...of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit," and "anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men" (Romans 14:17-18).

I will include in this section your next complaint, which concerns the deficiencies and wickedness that you perceive in the church:

A third thing that plagues my thoughts is the Church. It breaks my heart to see the things that I see within the Body. I read in the Scriptures what the Body is supposed to be, how She is supposed to act, and what the will of the Lord is for His precious Bride. Yet I look around me, see the things I see on television, and glance through the racks of books on the shelves of the local Christian bookstore and I think, "Father, why?" And so again I find myself wondering why all of this has been ordained (not allowed) to happen.

I would submit that given your dismal condition, you are in no position to judge the rest of the church, and the truth is that people like you are part of the problem. Why is the church in such a condition? It is partly because you are in it. How is your resentful attitude toward God's sovereignty better than the heretical doctrines and foolish practices that you despise in others?

Notice that your "Father, why?" implies disapproval. You think that God should arrange things one way, but he does not do it the way that seems best to you. Again, I ask, *why* should he do it your way? If you have no definite idea as to how things should be different, or if you have no definite reason as to why things should be as you conceive and desire them, then there is no basis to challenge or question God on the matter. Your "why" would be a random outburst of rebellion and dissatisfaction that has no rational basis, and thus requires no rational answer. How exactly do you think he should use his sovereignty in this situation, and why do you think so? Formulate your answer and attempt to justify it. Then bring it to God in prayer and see if he will accept your correction.

However, if it is understanding that you want, although I doubt that this is your true desire, then even this has been explained – in fact, not only by myself, but by many others. False doctrines and religions, whether outside or inside of the church, alarm the true people of God, awake them from their spiritual slumber and complacency, incite them to pursue holiness, and compel them to define the biblical doctrines and refine their theological formulations. Another reason that I taught but have not seen mentioned by others is that false doctrines and false religions produce apostasy in those who are in the church but who are not true believers, and thus relieve it of the burden that they impose upon the Christian community. My most recent statement of this appears in the article, "The Invincible Church."



The apostle John gives us another applicable teaching when he states, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). The context of the passage refers to false prophets and the spirit of the antichrist that propagate false doctrines. In the face of false doctrines and religions, I think as the apostle teaches me – I am from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in me is greater than he who is in the world. Compare this to your pathetic, "Father, why?" If you are really so concerned about the church (I doubt it), you are certainly not doing much to help it with your bad attitude.

Then, verses 5 and 6 state in a different way what I have said above about how false doctrines and religions serve to distinguish between true and false believers: "They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood." You have complained about God's sovereignty as it relates to several aspects of life, but it is as if you have no knowledge or understanding of all these biblical passages that I have been giving you. Do you read the Bible? Do you even have one? These passages are not hard to understand. They tell you outright what you need to know in plain words and direct sentences.

## **Human Spirituality and Divine Sovereignty**

This is the third and final section in the body of my answer, and after this I will make a conclusion. The topic here is divine sovereignty in relation to prayer. You wrote:

Brother, I am tired. I am so very tired. I no longer want to pray. I think, why do it? Yes, I may be praying concurrently with the will of God, but in the grand scheme of things what does this really matter? Does my prayer change anything? I cannot believe that it does. What God has ordained IS going to happen, regardless of whether or not I pray. And if I do not pray, isn't that non prayer ordained? If I pray, isn't that ordained?

As mentioned in the introduction, I have addressed this in my book *Prayer and Revelation*. There are at least two relevant chapters in the book entitled "Prayer and Sovereignty" and "Prayer and Omniscience." Although I consider what I have written in this and other books more than sufficient, here I will supplement these other materials by writing a specific answer to what you have stated above.

To paraphrase, for you the fact that God has foreordained all things by his absolute sovereignty removes any sense of purpose or meaning in prayer. But if this problem exists when it comes to divine sovereignty or foreordination, then it applies with equal force to divine foreknowledge. Although it applies in a different manner or from a different angle, the effect is the same.

Divine sovereignty or foreordination is entirely active – God decides what will happen and then causes it to happen, so that every event is determined in advance. For the sake of the contrast – that is, to make the illustration possible – let us suppose that divine foreknowledge is entirely passive, so that God decides and causes nothing at all, but that he only knows in advance what his creatures will decide and cause. This is an unbiblical use of the concept of foreknowledge, but let us assume it for the moment.

If this divine foreknowledge is as exhaustive as divine foreordination, then even if it is entirely passive, it would still mean that every event is determined in advance. God would know for certain beforehand what a man would decide and cause, and since this knowledge is perfect and infallible, then although God would not be the one bringing about the effect, it would still be as certain as if he had decided in advance to bring about this effect.

Therefore, if divine foreordination neutralizes all sense of purpose and meaning in prayer, then even a passive divine foreknowledge would do the same. This means that as long as you affirm divine foreknowledge and divine omniscience, you would have the same problem even if you do not affirm the doctrine of divine sovereignty or foreordination.

The necessary assumption behind your attitude is that unless your prayers are not foreordained and unless these non-foreordained prayers wield the power to affect circumstances (or affect God so that he would change the circumstances), then prayer is a pointless exercise. To say this another way, you think that prayer is meaningless unless you possess sovereign freedom (so that the decision to pray has not been foreordained by God), and unless you possess a metaphysical efficacy (so that you can change circumstances directly by your prayers) or at least a spiritual efficacy with God (so that you can persuade God to change circumstances). Of course, both this freedom and efficacy would require that the outcome in question has not been immutably foreordained or infallibly foreknown.

In other words, the assumption behind your attitude requires at least a God that is as weak as the one in open theism in order to preserve meaning for your prayers. This God is not all-powerful and not all-knowing, but his limitations leave many things "open," so to speak, to be determined by or at least in conjunction with the activities of his creatures. Your assumption requires this at the least, and indeed this is the reason many people are attracted to this heresy.

However, although your problem reduces in severity under open theism, it does not disappear. This God would still be a much stronger and wiser person than you, and in times of suffering and dissatisfaction it is still possible to think that he could help you, but that it seems he would not. He could still decide whether or not to answer your prayers, and indeed he could still help you apart from your prayers. He would still know about your problems and circumstances, and he could still make a better forecast about your future than you or anyone else could. So even with open theism, there is nothing to

prevent you from saying the same thing, or something very similar, that prayer does not seem to be a very meaningful thing to do.

You could mentally reduce the severity of meaninglessness by compromising the divine attributes of power and wisdom, but you cannot make it disappear. The issue will remain as long as there is any kind of God at all. Therefore, your attitude is consistent only with atheism. As long as God exists, you will never be happy, you will never see purpose in your effort, and you will never find prayer meaningful. Your complaint is not against the sovereignty of God, but against the existence of God.

In addition to divine foreordination, you stated that your prayers cannot change anything, and this is another reason for a lack of motivation to pray. Prayer does not change things, and if prayer does not change things, then you do not find it meaningful to pray. But who told you that prayer was supposed to change anything in the first place? And where did you get the idea that the meaningfulness of prayer should hinge on whether or not it changes things?

If the Bible says that prayer changes things, but you have discovered that it does not, then this means that the Bible is wrong, and it is meaningless to pray. But if the Bible is wrong, then you have a much bigger problem than the lack of motivation in prayer. In any case, for this line of thinking to hold, you must first find the places where the Bible teaches that prayer changes things in the sense required by the context of this discussion. For example, the Bible does say, "You do not have, because you do not ask God" (James 4:2), and "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16), but these verses do not contradict a God who sovereignly inspires the prayer and then sovereignly answers it. So does the Bible teach that prayer *as such* changes things? If on this point you think that the truth about prayer contradicts the Bible's teaching about it, then you must show that the Bible in fact teaches that prayer *as such* changes things, and then refute the biblical teaching.

In any case, you seem to agree that the Bible in fact does not teach that prayer *as such* changes things. But if the Bible itself does not say that prayer changes things, and you have also come to the same conclusion, so that the teaching that prayer changes things is unbiblical, then how does the recognition that an unbiblical idea about prayer is indeed wrong make the biblical idea about prayer less meaningful? What does one have to do with the other?

If the Bible teaches the truth about prayer in the first place, and does not teach the false idea, then how does the fact that the false teaching is indeed false nullify the true teaching about prayer? You have never stated what the Bible actually teaches about prayer and then show how *that* is not worthwhile or meaningful. You have discovered that the unbiblical perspective toward prayer is false. Good! But what does it have to do with Christian prayer, or the biblical teaching on prayer? Your thinking is arbitrary and irrational.

Your assumption is that, if you cannot make a difference by your own freedom and power, then it is meaningless to follow the precepts of God. If the outcome does not in some way depend on you apart from God's sovereign decision, then you have no motivation to do it. God's command does not move you. It makes no difference to you. But if prayer is meaningless because both the activity and the outcome have been foreordained, then your concern for your wife is also meaningless, since that has also been foreordained. Your love for your wife is empty and false. If so, then what are you complaining about? Why are you still so worried about her? What are you bothering me for? Your use of the doctrine is random and stupid.

Rather than finding ultimate purpose and conquering meaninglessness by knowing and obeying the precepts of God (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14), the very idea of God is what robs you of all purpose and meaning. Do you see the fearful but inevitable implication? The solution that you are looking for is atheism.

God has always been absolutely and exhaustively sovereign whether or not you knew about it. The doctrine of divine sovereignty is only a major aspect of a proper understanding and definition of God. And as such, it has a dividing and distinguishing effect. That is, as long as "God" is just a word, or just a concept that refers to a great person, many people can find common ground with it. But the more this idea is defined, and the more specific it becomes, men must begin to take sides with it or against it. In this manner, sound doctrine reveals the true nature of the heart, the true identity and destiny of each person.

As Hebrews 4:12-13 says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." The same gospel convicts some but hardens others. The same doctrine generates reverence in some but defiance in others, "Yes, Lord" in some but "Why, Lord?" in others. It uncovers every lie, and destroys every pretence.

I have dealt with some people who at first appeared to love the Lord, and to be zealous for the faith and persistent in prayer. But once I introduced to them the doctrine of divine sovereignty, they lost their grip on the whole Christian lifestyle and fell from the faith. There was nothing wrong with the doctrine, and there was nothing wrong in how I taught it. But like all biblical doctrines, this doctrine of divine sovereignty penetrates, judges, and exposes the real condition of the heart. Their faith was false all along, but they thought they could obtain some benefit from God. Once they learned that their prayers and efforts did not occupy the determinative role, and that they could not manipulate the situation in the way they desired, the masks came off and they abandoned the faith that they once professed.

## Conclusion

You wrote, "I am overwhelmed by the reality of God's sovereignty." This is a lie. You are overwhelmed with your own unbelief and rebellion, overwhelmed with your dissatisfaction toward how he uses his sovereignty. When God appeared to Job and confronted him with his sovereign power, Job said, "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." But this is not what you do – you just keep on complaining and asking "why."

You wrote, "I don't deem myself so grand that God would owe me an answer. He does not owe me anything." This is also a lie. It is clear from what you wrote that you do think he owes you, but you are upset because you know that *he* does not think that he owes you. If God does not owe you an answer, then why not just shut up? Why not be quiet and submit? But you keep on complaining and asking "why."

You wrote, "Quite honestly I do not assume or think anything at all." This is another lie. If you do not assume or think anything at all, then there would be no struggle and no conflict in your mind. You would not ask "why" in the face of God's sovereign decrees. The fact is that your thinking is filled with your own assumptions about how things ought to be, and the "why" appears only because in each instance God does something different from what you assume or think should be done.

You conclude each topic that you brought up with a "why" against God's sovereign decrees. You affirm his sovereignty, but you disagree with how he uses it. The "why" implies that when God does something other than what you assume he should do, you always consider your own expectation superior to what God has actually produced. In other words, you affirm God's sovereignty, but you want to be sovereign instead. You acknowledge that he is God, but you do not think that he should be or deserves to be. And it upsets you that he is more powerful than you are, so that you cannot do anything about this. It is futile to deny this, since in the previous pages I have demonstrated that this is the implication of the things that you said.

Then, when you are confronted with God's precepts and commands, by which you are to order your life and by which you will be held accountable, you answered, "The irony of it is that the ability to simply apply the truth is under the control of the sovereignty of our Lord. So if He wills it, then I will do it." You do this with every topic that you raised and every topic that has been raised to you. You enjoy rubbing God's sovereignty back in his face in protest of how he has been using it, and how he has been treating you.

However, I have now taken this away from you, and you may no longer do this. You may no longer appeal to divine sovereignty over and over again, at every turn, and at the conclusion of every topic, in order to spite the decrees of the Lord, to dismiss the pleadings of his servants, and to postpone obedience to the divine commands. This is because I have demonstrated that your understanding of divine sovereignty is almost entirely defective. You fail to apply it correctly and consistently, so that you are not qualified to make an authoritative appeal to it.

Scripture does not teach divine sovereignty the way that you affirm it, and it does not apply the doctrine the way that you appeal to it. Therefore, when you keep on asserting the idea of divine sovereignty at every turn, that has nothing to do with the application of a biblical doctrine. You are only imposing your own false understanding of the doctrine on the conversation or situation. Of course, you can still say the words and hide behind this excuse, but from now on, each time you do this it will increase your condemnation. "For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:37).

The Bible says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:8). It says, "In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work" (2 Timothy 2:20-21). And, "Therefore this is what the LORD says: 'If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman'" (Jeremiah 15:19).

Jesus says, "You do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:26-27). I have given you the word of God, and through it the true Shepherd has spoken to you. You want to talk about divine sovereignty? Good! You said, "If he wills, then I will do it." Right, if you are among his sheep, then you will listen to his voice and follow him. But if you harden your heart and reject what I have presented to you – if you refuse to follow the voice of the Shepherd – then we will all know what you are, or rather, what you are not. And that will be your final answer.