

Title: Meant For Evil, Overruled For Good, Part 1
Text: Acts 2.22-36
Theme: The Sovereignty of God and responsibility of man
Series: Acts #
Prop Stmtnt: God's Sovereign purposes do not relieve us of personal responsibility

Read Text:

When we read the Bible, we should ask questions of the text such as: 1) Is there a command to obey? 2) Is there a sin to avoid? 3) Is there an example to follow? 4) How does this point to Jesus? 5) What does this say about the gospel? 6) Is there a doctrine that is addressed? That last question is certainly the case here. One of the most challenging issues (doctrines) that you will ever grapple with is the one that Peter explicitly speaks to in this part of his sermon on the day of Pentecost. I am speaking about the tension that we feel between the Sovereignty (or rule) of God over all things and the relationship of that to our personal responsibility and accountability for the choices that we make. In reality, there is no tension between the Sovereignty of God and human responsibility. It just feels like it to us. This morning, I am addressing this because this truth (doctrine) is not only central to the entire sermon that Peter preached but this truth (doctrine) is so often misunderstood and misapplied.

For example, when some of your Christian friends find out that Cornerstone Baptist Church is your church, you may hear them say, "Oh, I heard they are Calvinistic over there." I know this because you come and ask me about it. "Are we Calvinistic?" What is that, exactly?" But, there is another, more important arena where this issue arises.

Let's say, that you've decided for a host of reasons to cut back on chocolate only to go into the grocery store and discover that a 5-lb bag of Dove Chocolates and Peanut M&M's are on a 75% off sale. What is the first question that pops into your head? "God, why are you doing this to me?" Right there, standing in the candy aisle you are having a theological crisis and doctrinal panic attack. The Sovereignty of God in ordaining a 75% sale on 5-lb bags of Dove Chocolates and Peanut M&M's just crashed head-on into your personal responsibility to make good choices. What do you do?

Here is how you start thinking. The Bible says that God is sovereign over all things, therefore God ordained that these Dove Chocolates and Peanut M&M's would be on sale and that I would be here in this aisle, at this moment, for such a time as this. And the Bible says that God would never tempt us beyond that we are able to handle, and God knows that there is no way that I could ignore this sale, right? Or worse, God, you knew that I was trying stop drinking or getting wasted, why did you allow that guy to offer me to go get high? How come you let that old boyfriend or girlfriend contact me at a weak moment when I had just been in an argument with my spouse?

This issue that our text raises is not theoretical, but intensely practical. In fact, if you do not understand it well, you will not understand the Bible well, the gospel well and you

will not do life very well. What is the relationship between the Sovereignty of God and our personal responsibility and accountability to the choices that we make? Look at v.23.

In this sermon, Peter is explaining the meaning of what has just happened to these followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. The sound of a powerful wind had filled the room, these believers had flames of fire appear on their heads and were speaking in different languages. The sounds and sights attracted a large crowd and Peter stood before them to let them know what was going on. The Spirit of God has come in fulfillment of the promises that God made hundreds of years before **and** because He has been sent by Christ who ascended back into heaven after completing his mission and ministry on earth. Note that: Peter's sermon has two main points: 1) God is fulfilling his promises and 2) Jesus came from God and went back to God after completing his mission.

In verse 23, these two themes intersect. You cannot talk about what Jesus did, without talking about what people did to Jesus. They go hand in hand. Jesus died on the cross. It was his mission and ministry to die on the cross. But, he died on the cross because he was rejected, betrayed, arrested, tried, beaten and executed. People did this to him. There were people living in Jerusalem right then who had firsthand knowledge of these events. The events of Acts 2 took place less than 2 months after the crucifixion of Christ. It is very possible that some of the same people who listened to Peter preach that day were in the crowd 50 days earlier who demanded that Jesus be crucified. And yet, the crucifixion of Jesus was not, in the ultimate sense, an unfortunate situation that got out of hand in the heat of the moment. His death was all part of the plan.

I. There is a relationship between God's Sovereignty and Human Responsibility. (23)

Peter declares two separate and yet very much related actions. A) Jesus was delivered up according to the DEFINITE plan and foreknowledge of God. B) You crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. So, obviously there is a relationship between the Sovereign plan of God who delivered Christ up and the personal responsibility for those who crucified him. God's plan to deliver Christ up and the decision and action of people to crucify took place simultaneously.

Let's unpack these a bit. The delivering up of Jesus was according to THE definite plan of God. Peter uses very clear language so that his audience would understand that God has developed and operates on the basis of THE plan, not a plan. THE plan is a definite plan. Definite means defined. It is detailed. When Christ was sent to the earth, he was not told to improvise, or figure it out when you get there, or fake it til you make it. The sending of Christ was planned in detail before creation ever happened (according to Ephesians 1), which is why all throughout the history of the OT, God revealed bits and pieces of this plan to his prophets who wrote about them hundreds of years before they happened. This is underscored again in this sermon that Peter is preaching. Three times he appeals to Old Testament passages. Everything that Jesus came to do and accomplish was according to THE definite plan.

Also, notice the word, foreknowledge. Jesus was delivered up according to THE definite plan of God and the foreknowledge of God. What does foreknowledge mean? Well, it obviously means to know something before it happens. But, while that is true, there is more. Oftentimes when the Bible uses the word knowledge it means more than merely information. For example, we read in Genesis 4.1 that Adam knew his wife Eve. What does that mean? Does that mean, that if you asked Adam, “Hey dude are you married?” or “Who’s that cute lady over there with dark hair?” that he would say, “Oh, that’s my wife Eve.”? So, yea, he knew his wife Eve. Is that it? No, the text goes on to say, that Adam knew his wife Eve and she conceived.... Oh, obviously this knowledge is more than information. This knowing of Eve by Adam speaks of intimacy, affection, and a deep personal relationship.

Ok, now we are getting somewhere. The delivering up of Jesus to be crucified was not only according to THE definite plan of God, but it was also according to the intimate, affectionate and deep personal relationship that the Son has with the Father as part of the Triune relationship that God enjoys as God. From one perspective, Jesus was delivered up to be crucified because God planned for it to happen. He ordained it. He promised it. He prepared the world for it. He announced it. And He did it. His planning, ordaining, promising, preparing and fulfilling was all very personal. The life of Christ on this earth was marked by continual communion with his Father. Even in his dying he cried out to and gave himself to the Father.

But there is another perspective to consider and Peter speaks to it when in his preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem he says, “you crucified (Jesus) and killed by the hands of lawless men.” I take “the hands of lawless men” to be a reference to the Roman soldiers who were Gentiles who did not live under the OT law of God. The Romans physically crucified Jesus at the demands of the Jews. Peter is placing the responsibility on them. If it wasn’t for the Jews who arrested Jesus and demanded his execution, the Romans would not have done it. So, Peter lays the blame on them. “You crucified and killed....” Later in v.36 he repeats the same accusation, “whom you crucified.”

So, there you have both God’s Sovereignty (meaning God’s rule and control over all things) and human responsibility being presented together as causes for the crucifixion of Jesus. There is, therefore, obviously a relationship between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. And...

II. The one does not cancel out the other.

How would you answer this question? Who killed Jesus? You could say, God did – and you would be right if you meant that Jesus died because God had ordained his death in order to pay for our sins and secure our pardon. If you said, “the Romans soldiers killed Jesus.” Again, you would be right, if you were referring to the actual individuals who carried out the process of execution by means of crucifixion on that day. If you said, “Pilate did, or the Jewish leaders did, or Judas did, or the crowd did, again, you would be right because all of them contributed to the event. Both the Sovereignty of God and the actual decisions of humans are all over this story and they are both presented. The one

does not cancel out the other. This is so important for you and I to understand, especially when dealing with tragedy. The evil decisions of people does not mean that there is no God or that God is not sovereign. Neither does the sovereign plan of God mean that there is no evil. There are evil people who make evil decisions that result in horrific consequences. God's sovereign plan does not eliminate evil, does not excuse evil, does not make evil any less evil. God's sovereign plan ensures us that evil will not have the final word. Evil will not win. Evil is on a leash.

Therefore...

III. Embrace both the sovereignty of God and human responsibility.

This is exactly what Peter is preaching. You did this! You crucified Jesus and you are responsible for your sin. And they knew it. They said to Peter and to the others (v.37), "what shall we do?" Look at v.38. What did Peter say? He said, "Hey no worries, it really wasn't your fault. It was God's plan and you were just a puppet on the stage." NO! Peter said, "Repent and be baptized." In other words, you need to take responsibility for your sin. Meanwhile, the entire sermon that Peter is preaching is proving from the OT prophecies, which is an argument from the Sovereignty of God that this Jesus is from God. Do you see how we are supposed to see? We are to embrace them both.

What happens if you emphasize human responsibility and ignore God's Sovereignty? You will think, feel and react as if you have to control everything in this life and when you do that, you will live from one panic attack to another. Every time you watch the news, go to the doctor, get on I-94, you might as well start guzzling pepto bismal or start popping Prozac. The very idea that we are ultimately in charge of this world is terrifying.

On the other hand, what happens if you so emphasize God's Sovereignty that you ignore human responsibility? You will become calloused, dull, uncaring, disconnected, and in a way, dehumanized. Do not use God's sovereignty as an excuse to be uncaring for tragedy in your world. Do not use God's sovereignty as an excuse for your own sin. Embrace them both. Look at how this plays out in this text.

How did Peter's audience respond to his preaching that confronted them with their sin? They embraced their sin. They took responsibility for it. They wanted to know what they could do. Well, what could they do? Think about it. They had participated in the ultimate crime of the universe. They were responsible for crucifying the very Son of God. Can you imagine the horror and terror of soul when that realization started to come upon them? There was no arguing, no defending, no attempts at self-justification or blame-shifting. There was conviction. There was guilt. There was shame. There was a fundamental recognition of personal responsibility. What hope was there for them (or you)? Their only hope (and yours) was found in the sovereign plan of God, who overruled their evil decision by using it as a means to provide for their salvation. They killed Jesus, but God accepted his death as the payment for their sin and he raised Jesus up from the dead because the evil decisions of man will never stop the plan of God. What

they meant for evil, God meant for good and even used their evil (without making it any less evil) as a means for their own good. Therefore...

IV. Realize that God's sovereignty is bigger.

Here is what I mean. The bible presents both the Sovereignty of God and human responsibility. They are not equal forces in competition with one another. The appearance of tension is only in our finite minds. God's sovereign plan made this universe, this earth and the human race with the capacity to choose and make decisions. God will judge every human for his or her decisions. Every human decision carries out God's sovereign plan, but no person can blame God for his or her own sin. You will not grasp all of this in this life, and perhaps never completely in the life to come since we are not and never will be God. This is designed by God to produce humble, obedient, trust in us.

Application:

1. Prayer and humble, obedient, trust

Many of you pray very little. Why is that? Is it pride? Certainly. But, I would suggest that it is pride expressed through a defective view of God's Sovereignty. If God is not in charge, then of course why would you pray? You don't ask me to make it sunny and warm on your wedding day, I'm not in charge. At the same time if God is in charge and we bear no responsibility, then we are not responsible to pray, or to serve, or to love, or to give, or to care or to help. God will take care of it. But, if I (embrace both) recognize that our Sovereign God commands me to pray (human responsibility) so that I will be dependent upon him and because he has ordained that the prayers of his people are his sovereign means to involving us with his plans and he uses our prayers as a means to carry out his plans, then we will pray.

2. Witnessing and humble, obedient, trust

If you do not realize that God is sovereign over salvation, then you will be tempted to believe that it is your job to make people believe and when you share the gospel with someone and they do not believe, then you will be crushed by your sense of failure. On the other hand, if you believe that God is sovereign over salvation and therefore everyone who is supposed to be saved, will be saved, with or without you, and you use that as an excuse not to witness, then you are guilty of disobeying the very mission of the church. Embrace them both. This is what Jesus was talking about in John 10 when he said, "other sheep have I who are not of this fold, them also I must reach." There are sheep that in God's sovereign plan he has elected to believe and you and I are responsible to witness, to go and to send people to the ends of the earth to bring the gospel to them. This is exactly what happened in Antioch of Pisidia when Paul and Barnabas first went to this city and preached the gospel. Acts 13:48 says, "and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed." Share the gospel because God has ordained that the sharing of the gospel is the means by which his sheep will hear his voice.

3. Suffering/Tragedy and humble, obedient, trust

There was a lady in our church who was one of the most thoughtful, deliberate, loyal (intensely) and faithful members I have known. Most of what she did was behind the scenes. I was going on a trip to India and she gave me a pack of vitamins and supplements and things that she had researched and purchased specifically for what she thought I was going to be exposed to. Her thoughtfulness for others was incredible. She died way too young. It was a medical mistake. It was a terrible medical mistake. It should never have happened. But it did. Someone was responsible for the mistake. It would not be right to say that what happened to her was okay because God is sovereign. At the same time, her family, many of whom are here this morning, have not lived since that tragic day eaten alive with bitterness. Why not, because they know that if God has overruled the evil of man for good, he will overrule the tragic mistakes of people as well. And in the end, it will be good. All things work together for good for those who love God. All things in the moment are not good, but they will work together for good for those who love God, because those who are called (believers) according to his purpose are those whom he foreknew and predestined and called and justified and sanctified. God finishes what he starts and fulfills everything that he promises, which is why even suffering and tragedy are never in charge, but even though they are meant by the Evil One and evil people for our demise, God rules and overrules them for his glory, our good and his definite plan.

Embrace both so that you will pray, witness, suffer, live and die under the hand of God.