

# hand in Hand

# FAQ

## **Q: Why should we even discuss such a divisive topic? Isn't it better just to let it alone?**

I can think of at least seven excellent reasons why growing believers should prayerfully ponder both God's sovereignty and human choice. Such an activity:

- Increases our trust in God and His purposes for us.
- Builds our appreciation for God's Word.
- Helps us to become more like Christ by emphasizing our need for humility.
- Trains us to look carefully at all sides of an issue.
- Makes it easier for us to experience the Christian unity for which Jesus prayed.
- Enables us to avoid both fatalism and crushing guilt.
- Prevents us from becoming trivial people in a shallow age.

*(See pages 11-22)*

## **Q: If we can't fully understand how God's sovereignty and human choice fit together, then why bother trying?**

Surely it's possible to better understand what we cannot fully comprehend? A question need not be fully resolved in order to *some* shed light on it. And is not light preferable to darkness? Jesus expects us to grow in both grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). And although we can never come to an exhaustive understanding of such deep things on this side of heaven (1 Corinthians 13:12), the Bible consistently urges us to ponder them, expecting that God will give us greater understanding (2 Timothy 2:7; 1 Corinthians 13:11; Hebrews 5:12; 6:1; Colossians 1:28).

*(See pages 10-11)*

## **Q: I've already made up my mind. Why should I reopen the discussion?**

The Bible strongly encourages us to consider "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27, ESV), and that certainly includes this topic. Literally hundreds of verses throughout the Scriptures speak to this issue. And since we serve a Lord who is "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), whose Spirit enables us to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15, NLT), we ought to be able to use discus-



sions like these as opportunities to follow Paul's counsel: "Grow to maturity. Encourage each other. Live in harmony and peace. Then the God of love and peace will be with you" (2 Corinthians 13:11, NLT). Closing our minds to something the Lord may want to teach us through a better apprehension of his Word is neither smart nor safe.

*(See pages 8-10)*

**Q: If God is truly sovereign, how could He allow so much pain and evil to afflict the world?**

We should not judge the Creator by the way the world is now, for it is neither as God created it nor as it one day will be. It was once better and it will eventually be better. It is a fallen world in the process of redemption.

If we look back to what it once was and fast-forward to what it will one day be, however, everything changes. And if we view the present world as an essential part of our preparation for that future world, then we may see the present world, even with all its evil and suffering, as *the best possible way for a sovereign God to get us to that best possible world* that awaits us.

The apostle Paul fully anticipated the arrival of something far greater than anything found in this fallen world. He had suffered much, but he also expected to be raised with Christ into an eternity so packed with wonders that he had no words to describe its glory. And that is why he could truthfully say, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

When we think as he did—when we acknowledge the suffering and pain of this life but look forward to a glorious future with God in which the worst hardships here won't even be worth comparing to the least joys there—we will find the strength and encouragement we need to finish our course on this earth, whatever it may entail. Such a forward-looking, faith-based perspective gives us what nothing else can. While no current *explanation* of our suffering on earth can suffice (including mine), Paul assures us that our eventual *experience* in eternity will more than suffice.

*(See pages 150-153, 184-186)*

**Q: Does "Open Theism" help to explain why our world suffers so much?**

Proponents of open theism believe that God does not and cannot know in advance the future choices that his free creatures will make. If he did, say open theists, 1) there would be no such





thing as free will and 2) God would not be loving toward his children when he permits terrible evils to overtake them.

The God of historic, orthodox Christianity, to the contrary, is a God who cares deeply about us, but who also has a purpose and plan even for the bad things we encounter. Open theism interprets this viewpoint as cruel and tries to persuade us we can love God more because he doesn't have a purpose and a plan in our suffering. Such a God may seem more approachable and lovable, but at what expense? Open theism appears to turn God into a bumbling Do-gooder. He means well, but the poor soul just can't cope with human freedom. While some individuals say they find comfort in open theism, I see no logical basis for their comfort.

*(See chapter 6)*

**Q: How can Romans 8:28 be of any comfort to someone who has suffered a horrible tragedy?**

A speaker once asked her listeners to fold a paper in half. She then instructed them to write on the top half the worst things that had happened to them, and on the bottom half the best things. Invariably, people found things at the top of the page that they also included at the bottom. Experiences they'd labeled as the worst things that ever happened to them had, *over time*, become some of the best things that ever happened.

God has the wisdom and the power to use even the most painful, difficult experiences of life for our ultimate good. While evil and suffering are not good, our sovereign and loving God can use them to accomplish immeasurable good. Knowing this should give us great confidence that even when we don't see any redemptive meaning in our suffering, *God* can see it . . . and one day we will, too. Therefore, we need not run from suffering or lose hope if God doesn't remove it. We can trust that God has a purpose for whatever he permits.

*(See pages 46-48; 122; 172, 181-188)*

**Q: Are there any examples in the Bible of God's sovereign choice and human free choice working together?**

There are many, but here let's consider just one. In 2 Corinthians 8:16-17, the apostle Paul writes, "I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative."



Notice the process: *God* puts a deep concern for the Corinthians into the heart of Titus, and then Titus decides *on his own initiative* to visit the Corinthians. He comes to Corinth, enthusiastically and of his own accord, because God first placed a strong love for the Corinthians in his heart. Apparently, Paul had no problem thinking both of these statements could be true at the same time; he didn't see a contradiction between God's sovereign choice and Titus's meaningful and consequential choice. And I doubt whether any of Paul's readers said, "Poor Titus, God forced him to care and then to make a free, personal choice to visit the Corinthians!"

*(See chapter 7)*

**Q: Can Arminians and Calvinists really ever come to respect each other?**

Why not? If two of history's most famous proponents of these competing systems could do so, then why can't the rest of us?

Although John Wesley (1703-1791) and George Whitefield (1714-1770) became close friends while studying at Oxford University, theological and methodological differences eventually brought them into sharp conflict. While Wesley became known for his Arminianism and Whitefield for his Calvinism, the two men never allowed their friendship to completely wither over their pointed theological disagreement.

Eventually the pair reconciled enough that, before Whitefield died, he requested that Wesley preach at three memorial services to be held for him in London. Consider how the mature Wesley regarded the controversy that had raged between him and his late friend: "There are many doctrines of a less essential nature with regard to which even the most sincere children of God... are and have been divided for many ages. In these we may think and let think; we may 'agree to disagree.'"

*(See pages 166-168)*

**Q: Can you name any good role models from history who held balanced views of divine sovereignty and human choice?**

I have many theological heroes from the past, from both "sides" of the issue, and many of them frequently emphasized the necessity of balancing the two doctrines by allowing Scripture to have the last word. C.H. Spurgeon (1834-1892) once





declared, for example, “Brethren, be willing to see both sides of the shield of truth. Rise above the babyhood which cannot believe two doctrines until it sees the connecting link. Have you not two eyes, man? Must you needs put one of them out in order to see clearly?”

I believe Spurgeon is probably as close as any human being in articulating what Scripture as whole reveals on this topic. He let the Scripture be Scripture, usually without twisting it to fit his theology. His evangelistic fervor expressed itself in nearly every sermon he preached, as he called upon unbelievers to choose Christ and believers to choose greater submission to Christ.

Spurgeon strongly believed, as I do, that we should seek first to be consistent with the Bible, not with a particular theological persuasion. He insisted that any position which denies either God’s complete sovereignty or our meaningful choice fails to stand up to Scripture.

A second example would be Charles Simeon (1758-1836). I have heard it said that if there had not been a Charles Simeon, there never could have been a Charles Spurgeon. Simeon came on the English church scene during an age of dull, lifeless preaching, and reinvigorated it with a dual emphasis on the primacy of Scripture and the necessity of practical application.

*(See pages 156-167)*

#### **Q: Where do you stand on this issue?**

I believe we need to affirm *both* divine sovereignty and meaningful human choice. Still, when one biblical text has to be viewed in light of another, I think it wisest to view passages addressing human choice through the lens of God’s sovereignty, rather than the other way around.

I function in this way because the universe began and ends with God, not humankind. The universe is first and foremost about the purposes, plan, and glory of God, not about us. And because he is infinite and we are finite, his choices naturally carry more weight.

If, as we read Scripture, we see God through the lens of human nature, we will have a far greater tendency to distort him. But if we see humanity through the lens of God’s nature, as revealed in his Word, then we will see ourselves accurately.

*(See pages 108-109, 169-170)*