

2 Kings 8:7-15 Sovereignty and Responsibility

1 Kings 19:15 records the fact that God had commissioned **Elijah** to anoint a man named Hazael as the king of Syria. God intended Hazael to be the means of judgment upon the rebellious and idolatrous nation of Israel. It appears that Elijah never got around to anointing Hazael as king. We find in our passage today that Elisha told Hazael that he would be the king and would mete out God's judgment on Israel.

In our passage, we see that God shows his prophet what will happen in the future. Hazael will be the king of Syria and will do some terrible things to the Israelites; he will be the instrument of God's judgment on his rebellious people.

Beyond that, this passage deals with a very deep and difficult topic: the relationship between God's sovereign control and human responsibility. God knows what is going to happen in the future, but humans play a part in bringing that future into reality.

So today I want to consider how God's sovereignty and human responsibility interact. This is one of the most difficult topics in all of theology. As you might assume, there are many opinions on this issue.

We must admit that this is a great mystery. We are looking into rather deep theology, I don't pretend to know how God can be sovereign and man can be responsible at the same time. But we know that these two ideas are compatible, not contradictory. God controls human events, yet humans make legitimate decisions for which they are accountable.

In this text, God reveals the future, but that future depends on human actions. So there's a delicate balance between God's control of all things and people acting to bring about the result that God intends. So we have to tread rather carefully through this issue.

First, we should look at some of the details from the text.

- .7 Remember that Damascus was the capital city of Syria, and that Syria and Israel were often in military conflict. The king of Syria had previously tried to capture Elisha, probably with the intent of killing him. Elisha was the prophet to Israel, which was just south of Syria. Why was Elisha in Damascus? The text doesn't tell us.
- .7 In spite of this ongoing conflict, and in spite of the fact that the Syrians were pagan idol worshippers, Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria, considers Elisha to be a "man of God." He apparently has great respect for Elisha. He wants to inquire of Elisha whether he'd recover from his sickness. So he sends Hazael, presumably a high officer in the kingdom, to ask Elisha whether he'd recover from his sickness.
- .10 Elisha says something very odd: the king would certainly recover, but he'd also surely die. The Lord had revealed to Elisha that the king would have recovered had someone not killed him. His death is imminent, but it's not the sickness that will kill him. We find out in vs. 15 that Hazael is a murderer; he suffocated the king; that was the cause of his death.
- .15end Hazael then becomes king. And we know that God had determined that Hazael would be the king and would be the instrument of God's judgment against the northern kingdom of Israel, and especially against the wicked house of king Ahab. God would use Hazael to wipe out Ahab's whole family.
- We find out in vs. 12 that Hazael would do all manner of violence to the people of Israel—he would destroy their cities, kill their young men, and viciously attack both women and children. All this would happen as an outpouring of God's judgment against the idolatrous nation of Israel.
- .11 Elisha weeps at the prospect of what Hazael is about to do. Even though this was God's plan, Elisha finds this future very distressing. He's not happy about the fact that God's judgment is about to fall on Israel even though they deserved it. But he does not try to talk Hazael out of it. Elisha knows that Israel deserves the punishment they are about to receive.

With all of that in mind, let's consider what this passage tells us about both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man.

I. God knows the future.

- A. The Bible reveals to us repeatedly that God is omniscient; he knows all things, including what will happen in the future.
- B. How does God know the future? We only have two options:
1. Either God knows the future because he has the power to foresee what's going to happen through the natural course of events;
 2. Or God knows the future because he is guiding events to their predetermined ends. I.e., the future comes to pass because God sovereignly ordains it.
 3. In the first option, God merely stands by and observes. He looks through the tunnel of time to see what's going to happen. He's not *controlling* what happens, he's merely *observing* what happens. Things are happening naturally or independently. God is not controlling events. The future unfolds apart from God's control under this option.
 4. In the second option, God is actively involved and is moving all things to their appointed goals. Things happen because God intends for them to happen. All things are moving toward their God-ordained ends because God insures that they do.
 5. Which of these options does the Bible teach? Is God just a casual observer who can see into the future, or is God controlling events and thus knows the future?

Note the following verses.

Isaiah 46:9–10 ... *I am God, and there is none like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, 'My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure.'*

Isa 46:11 ... *I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it.*

Dan 4:35 ... [God] does according to His will in the army of heaven And among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand Or say to Him, "What have You done?"

Ac 2:23 [Jesus], being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;

Ac 4:27-28 For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, ... both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together **to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.**

Ephesians 1:11 ...[God] works all things according to the counsel of His will.

Does God *learn* what's going to happen in the future, or does God *determine* what's going to happen in the future? The consistent teaching of the Bible is that God doesn't learn what's going to happen through observation; he determines what's going to happen through his purpose and power. If God is sovereign, then the future is settled. God's purposes will stand.

In order for God's plans to be fulfilled, he has to control the steps leading to the outcome he has planned. God establishes both the ends and the means to those ends.

Quote: Ultimately, there is only one alternative to a world ruled by God, and that is a world under the impulse of pure chance. ... He either rules over all or he rules not at all.¹

God is either a casual observer, or he rules and reigns.

We affirm that he rules over all. Things don't happen by chance; they happen according to the sovereign will of God.

¹ John Cheeseman, *Elisha: Man of Mission, Man of Miracles*, People in the Bible (Leominster: Day One, 2015), 83.

Trans: God's plan was for Hazael to become king and to destroy the house of Ahab because of its sin. Elisha sees the prophecy come to fulfillment. God has a plan, and that plan will happen in time.

II. God brings the future to pass through human action.

God is not limited by human cooperation; he will fulfill his plans with or without human input. But most of the time, God works through people, even wicked, ungodly people.

A. How is God going to bring judgment down on his rebellious and idolatrous people? Through the violence of the Syrian army led by Hazael. But Hazael has to become the king before that happens. How is Hazael going to gain the throne? By murdering Ben-Hadad. All of that requires human activity.

B. Now we come to a very tricky part of this whole equation. If God knows the future because he's controlling events leading to that future, what role does man play? There are only two options here:

1. Either man is like a puppet on strings who is doing whatever God wants, like a computer running a program or like a robot;
2. Or man follows his own will, but in doing so, also fulfills God's will. God is able to use the voluntary decisions of man for his own purposes.
3. If man is merely a puppet/computer/robot, then he is not responsible for his actions. He would simply be running the program he was given. He would have no choice in the matter and would not be responsible for what he does.

We don't hold computers or robots responsible for what they do; we hold the programmers responsible.

Does God hold us responsible for our actions? Yes. That proves that we are not merely robots or puppets.

4. People do what they want to do, and God is able to use the free choices of humans to accomplish his purposes. Man's creaturely free will is compatible with God's sovereign will. Man can freely choose a course of action for himself, while God uses that decision to fulfill his own purposes.
5. For the same act, God has one set of intentions, while man may have an entirely different set of intentions. Man does what he wants, and God uses those actions to accomplish his purposes.
6. We find that all over the Bible. Here are two examples, one OT and one NT:

Genesis 50:20 *But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, ...*

Mk 10:32-34 *[Jesus] took the twelve aside again and began to tell them the things that would happen to Him: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again."*

The priests, scribes, and Gentiles did exactly what they wanted to do, and they did exactly what God intended for them to do. Human will and God's will had different goals, but the outcome was the same—God's will was accomplished through the actions of sinful men.

7. This is a great mystery: how can God use the free actions of humans to fulfill his predetermined plan? I don't pretend to know how God works it out. I only know that God is sovereign and that man is responsible for his behavior. God uses the free acts of man to accomplish his predetermined goals/ends.

8. Because people follow their own wills and desires when they make their decisions, God holds them accountable for their actions. God doesn't force or coerce people to make the decisions that they make. They make decisions according to their nature and will, and God hold them accountable for their decisions.
9. God is able to use the evil acts of wicked people to fulfill his own purposes. He does that without being the author of sin and without forcing people to act against their wills.

Trans: God brings the future to pass through human action. They accomplish God's will without even knowing it.

III. The sovereignty of God does not reduce the responsibility of man.

- A. Hazael murdered Ben Hadad. That was both a crime and a sin. He committed that crime because he wanted to; it was a voluntary act. He followed the desires of his heart. No one forced him to do it.
- B. Elisha further prophesied that Hazael would do all manner of brutal, vicious things to the people of Israel. Note in vss. 11-12 that Elisha weeps at the prospect of what Hazael will do to the Israelites. God's judgment on his people will be very severe, and Elisha is very upset about that.
- C. So who is responsible for all of this violence? There are only two options:
 1. The first option is that God is responsible because he forced Hazael to do these things. In that case, Hazael could legitimately say, "I'm not morally responsible for my actions because I did what God made me do. I just ran the program God gave me."
 2. The other option is that humans are responsible for their own actions even if their actions fulfill the plan and purpose of God. People do what they desire to do, and in so doing, they fulfill the will of God.

3. If God forced Hazael to murder Ben Hadad, then God would be the author of sin. Of course, we know that God is *not* the author of sin. He neither sins himself nor entices anyone to sin. God cannot sin, but he can use sinful people and their evil acts to accomplish his own purposes.
4. God holds people accountable for their actions even when those actions fulfill God's sovereign plan. The fact that humans are responsible for their own actions is taught from the beginning to the end of the Bible. No one can blame God for sin. We sin because we want to, not because God forces us to. We follow our own desires, and that's what God judges us for.
5. Another good example of this is recorded in Isa 10:5-7, 12-15. The Assyrians were doing what they wanted to do—their plan was to invade and destroy Judah. The Assyrians did not realize that God was using them to accomplish his will, but that's what was happening. And God would hold the Assyrians accountable for what they had done. He would judge them because they were liable for their sin, even though what they were doing was part of God's plan.
6. So we find that people act according to their desires. God does not force or coerce people to make the decisions that they make. Yet these choices fit within the will of God. God uses the free choices of evil people to accomplish his predetermined goals.
7. Man's responsibility remains intact, and God's sovereignty remains intact; we affirm both. God holds people responsible for the sins they committed when accomplishing God's will. Again, this is a great mystery, but it is faithful to the teaching of the Bible.

As we consider the implications of this passage, we again are driven to the conclusion that God's thoughts and ways are far beyond our comprehension. With Paul we can say, "How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out. For who hath known the mind of the Lord?"

But we know that God is sovereign. Hazael cannot come to power apart from God's will and purpose. That's true for every political leader, both the good and the bad. We trust that God has a purpose behind it all, even if that purpose is to pour out his judgment on a nation. We can praise God that he knows what he's doing, and that no plan of his will fail to come to pass.

We can trust God's promises as well as his threats. If God says something will happen, we can trust that God will bring it to pass. When God makes a threat, we know that he can fulfill that threat.

It's unfortunate that Ben Hadad didn't ask Elisha how he could be right with God. He died as a pagan idolater. The Bible assures us that it is appointed to everyone to die. People don't want to think about it, but death is inescapable. All of us will die, either through natural or unnatural means. The time to prepare for that reality is now, while we still have the opportunity. Ben Hadad's opportunity is gone; his destiny is unchangeable. As long as you are alive, you still have the opportunity to choose your eternal destiny. Repent and trust in Christ before it's too late.