

The Book Of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 9:15-16

Summary of Calvinism and Arminianism or “Free Will”:

“God knows everything, therefore He cannot be surprised by anything. He remains omniscient and omnipotent, regardless of anything that humans do. Nonetheless, God does not “send” anyone to hell, but he does allow humans to reject the gospel. On the other hand, no one can take credit for their salvation. Paul says we are “saved by grace through faith ... it is the gift of God so that no one can boast.”

- **“How do we understand God’s Sovereignty and Saul’s salvation?”**

vv. 15-16: “But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

Two corresponding thoughts:

1. God sovereignly chose Saul for his role in the spread of 1st-century evangelism. 2. Saul’s choice in the matter.

- A hard Calvinistic stance: “God predestined Saul to be an apostle and he had no say in the matter.”
- A hard Arminian stance: “God may have chosen Saul, but it was purely up to him to decide what to do.”

“How do we allow for the Sovereignty of God while preserving human cooperation, or even an uncooperating heart?”

Acts 26:14: "And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'"

- **"Kicking Against The Goads"**

We often talk of Saul's conversion as if it were a sudden, instantaneous event. Was that his first and momentous encounter with Jesus?

Paul's words about Jesus speaking to him about "kicking against the goads" is not in Luke's Acts 9 account. We don't find it until his Acts 26 defense before Herod Agrippa.

"Kicking against the goads": A well-known proverb in both Greek and Latin literature. A "goad" was a long, extremely sharp stick used to guide an ox during plowing.

In Saul's experience, Jesus was the farmer and Saul was the ox. Jesus found it necessary to "break in" the stubborn bull by using the goad to move him in the direction he wanted him to go. Since the goad was sharp, Saul's resistance was painful, but not impossible.

- **What were the goads that Saul was kicking against?**

Two ideas from John Stott's commentary:

1. Saul's Private Doubts:

On a conscious level Saul opposed Jesus as an impostor – one who had been rejected by his own people and had died on a cross under the curse of God. But what about subconsciously?

Did Saul ever see Jesus' ministry? Some possible clues: 1. Saul and Jesus were close to the same age. 2. Saul would have visited the Temple at least three times a year for the major festivals. 3. Saul probably was in Jerusalem for the same Passover week in which Jesus was tried and executed.

2. Stephen's Defense And Martyrdom:

Saul's own testimony confirms that he was present at Stephen's trial and execution. But more than this, he never forgot that he was the one who held the garments of Stephen's accusers as they hurled the first deadly stones at him.

- **"It is hard for you to kick against the goads."**

Jesus "goaded" Saul into the right direction, and the goading caused Saul pain. For some time, instead of submitting to Jesus, Saul kicked against the goads, but it only increased his pain.

The road to Damascus experience wasn't really Saul's first encounter with Jesus: It was the culmination of Jesus' campaign to rein in the persecutor and bring him into the circle of his followers.

"How do we understand God's Sovereignty and Saul's salvation?"

"Was Saul forced to become a Christian, or did he have a choice in the matter?"

- Galatians 1:15-16: "... Even before I was born, God chose me and called me by his marvelous grace. Then it pleased him to reveal his Son to me so that I would proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles."
- Acts 26:16-18: "I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant. You are to tell others what you have seen of me today and what I will show you in the future. I will rescue you from the people of Israel and from the Gentiles to whom I will send you. You are to open their eyes and turn them from the darkness to the light and from the power of Satan to God, so that through their faith in me they will have their sins forgiven and receive their place among God's chosen people."

Jesus' statements seem to land on the side of complete predestination by God but look at what Saul says in verse 19: "And so, King Agrippa, I did not disobey the vision I had from heaven."

Thirty of 32 translations of Acts 26:19 use an equivalent of the phrase, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." Only The New Living Translation and the Contemporary English Version say, "And so, King Agrippa, I obeyed (this)that vision from heaven."

What is the obvious implication of the phrase, "I did not disobey the vision I had from heaven"? Isn't it that Saul/Paul had a choice?

"How can we put God's sovereignty and human choice in the same context? Picture two overlapping circles: "God's Sovereignty" and "Human Choice".

If we only focus on the first circle, then everything is predestined, and humans have no choice. If we only focus on "Human Choice", then humans are totally in charge of their own lives.

But what if the circles overlap? Picture a hatched area between the two circles of God's Sovereignty and Human Choice – and intersection as it were. In this scenario neither one is exclusive of the other.

Examples of bible passages where humans have resisted and thwarted God's plans:

- **Old Testament: Adam And Eve.**

Of all the humans to ever live on planet Earth, Adam and Eve had the most ideal situation and the greatest potential to become all that God intended for them.

Psalm 51:5 (Good News Translation): "I have been evil from the day I was born; from the time I was conceived, I have been sinful." As a result of our first parents' choices, we carry the DNA of disobedience.

- **New Testament: The Five Hebrews Warnings** (See: Hebrews 2:1-4; 4:12-13; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:25-29)
 1. Hebrews 2:1-4: The warning to pay attention and to not neglect such a great salvation.
 2. Hebrews 4:12-13: The warning against unbelief. On the heels of speaking about Moses, the presents Christ as superior to Moses in every way thinkable. Then he talks about the unbelief of the wilderness generation.
 3. Hebrews 6:4-8: The warning against falling away. By coming to Christ and then turning away, you are being like the ground that only produces thorns.
 4. Hebrews 10:26-31: The warning against ongoing deliberate sin. They are rejecting the Greater High Priest by doing this.
 5. Hebrews 12:25-29: The warning about letting a bitter root grow up and becoming defiled like Esau.

These Old Testament and New Testament verses demonstrate that God's sovereignty and Human choices have definite intersecting points. Somewhere in the overlapping of the two is the answer to the question, "Can God be sovereign but still allow for humans to have free will?"

In Saul's case, the Road to Damascus experience was the culmination of what God had already been doing in his life. It wasn't a sudden salvation. God had been goading Paul in the right direction for some time. The Damascus experience was the intersection between God's preparation for Saul's role in the Gospel and Saul's submission to God's call.

Next Time: Ananias' visit with Saul