

Series: God Saves #1422

Title: Romans 8.29b

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

Thank you for joining me today from wherever you are and by however you listen as we meet together coast-to-coast here in the United States and all the way around the world. We are transitioning in our series on predestination from a discussion on God's free will to human free will. The question that we raised last time stands before us: how is God's sovereignty related to human free will? Or, perhaps I can put it this way: what does predestination do to our free will? God's sovereignty and human free will, according to the Bible, are *not* contradictory. Our task is to demonstrate how the two go together.

And we had a hint at the compatibility yesterday when we finished with RC Sproul's insight from his book *Chosen By God*. He said, "At a human level we readily see that people can enjoy a real measure of freedom in a land ruled by a sovereign monarch. It is not freedom that is cancelled out by sovereignty; it is *autonomy* that cannot co-exist with sovereignty...The word autonomy means 'self-law.' To be autonomous means to be a law unto oneself. An autonomous creature would be answerable to no one...If God is sovereign, man cannot possibly be autonomous. If man is autonomous, God cannot possibly be sovereign. These would be contradictions."

Then, Sproul adds: "One does not have to be autonomous to be free. Autonomy implies *absolute* freedom. We are free, but there are limits to our freedom. The ultimate limit is the sovereignty of God (*Chosen By God*, 181)." This is true, and I think helpful, and a good starting point. And we will flesh this out, we will add substance to this as we go along. We are not autonomous. But we are free. How it is that we are free to make choices within the sovereign will of God? Let's find out.

At the same time, let's also acknowledge this remains, for us, a mystery. At least for me, I have to say that as much as I have studied the interplay between God's will and my will or God's choice and my choice – in the doctrine of predestination – I do not fully understand this. I am limited in my understanding because I am human. I know that God has chosen me for Himself. I know that I have been predestined to believe in His Son Jesus for my salvation. I believe I am among God's elect, chosen from before the foundation of the world. And I know, because I was there, I know Jesus identified Himself to *me*. I did not choose Him. I was not seeking Him, rather He sought *me*.

At the same time, I made a conscious choice to follow the Lord Jesus; to be His disciple, His slave for life. As much as that may *sound* contradictory, it is not. All of this is true at the same time. That is why this is a mystery, as in something that is true but that we do not fully understand. It is right up there with the Trinity, evil in a world created by a good and loving God, and the suffering of God's people whom He deeply loves. All of this is true, but not something we fully comprehend in this very human life we now live.

But, saying we are dealing here in mystery is not a convenient way of saying, "Let's just leave it then and move on without talking about human free will in light of God's free will." As I said last time, we are not doing that. And so, let's get on with it. And I want to begin by telling you a little about the *great* work that has already been done on this long before I got behind this microphone and you sat there by your radio or phone or computer and heard me speak. Christians, and to be more specific, theologians have been wrestling with human free will for centuries. And, as I often remind you, we do very well to check out what they have to say – to be informed by the Holy Spirit infused, frankly brilliant thinking of Christians down through history on whatever topic befalls us in this twenty-first century!

It turns out all the great theologians worth reading have wrestled with predestination and the will of men and women. And there are three, in particular, that I want to tell you about today. My reason for targeting our discussion on these three is not because they are the only ones worth hearing from or because we will only talk about them. Not at all. In fact each of these three benefitted from the men who came before them and so on all the way back to Jesus and the apostles. And we will hear from other theologians in our journey. The reason I want to say something about these guys is because they are going to help us understand God's will and our will together.

And I am going to work backwards, starting with the most modern of the three. His name you already have, RC Sproul. Born in 1939 and died in 2017. He was a premier thinker, philosopher, pastor, educator, and theologian. He is, to my mind, the greatest proponent of Reformed theology in the last 100 years. You may already know him as the founder of Ligonier Ministries and as the Bible teacher on the *Renewing Your Mind* radio ministry heard all throughout the world, maybe even on this fine station. Now with the Lord, Dr. Sproul always stood with firm conviction on the authority and inerrancy of the Word of God. His writing, in particular, has had a very positive impact on my life and ministry.

I never met him. I never heard him preach or teach in-person. But several of his books and video series available from Ligonier Ministries have been of great benefit to me. And there are two books that have helped me, tremendously, in understanding predestination, the will of God, and the will of men and women. The first, which you have heard me talk about is *Chosen By God* and the second is *Willing to Believe*. Let me urge you to get a hold of *Chosen By God*. It is *very* understandable. *Willing to Believe* is not as easy a read, more theological and philosophical, but many of you will have no trouble with it because you enjoy those disciplines of study.

It is important for me to identify RC Sproul at the start because you need to know I am following the outline of his arguments for the compatibility of God's free will and our free will. I credit him with directing my thinking on this all-important subject. *And*, I mention him first because he has taken what he believes from other men that came before him! As Dr. Sproul had to acknowledge where his theology came from, so do I. So do *you*, by the way. If it is new, it is not true, as Sproul disciple Steve Lawson likes to say. And so, each of us are standing on the shoulders of the giants that came before us.

None of us should be getting our theology out of thin air, or imagining that we have some insight that has not dawned on anyone else in history! God forbid. We use the understanding gained by mature Christian thinkers that have come before us to inform our own convictions about what is true. Which leads me to the second person who will inform our discussion and he is Jonathan Edwards. Born in 1703 and died in 1758, Edwards is America's greatest Christian theologian and, I would argue, philosopher. He was a pastor at the time of a spiritual revival that broke out of his church in Northampton Massachusetts. This was part of what we know as the First Great Awakening. Since I am from Massachusetts, here in the States, and since I pray regularly for the Lord to revive us again, Edwards is close to my heart.

His most famous sermon, which God greatly used, is *Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God*. And then there is his writing! Wow, he wrote. And his book of great interest to us in this study is *The Freedom of the Will*. As will become obvious certain arguments he makes in that work help us, especially as interpreted for us by RC Sproul, an Edwards disciple. I will also mention that Jonathan Edwards adhered to Reformed theology as does Sproul as do I, and this most biblical of all theologies came from the next of the three theologians we will learn a lot from and he is...Augustine, or I should say, Saint Augustine.

Born in 354 and died in 430. You might ask, "Did I hear you right, 354 to 430?" That is correct. We took a big leap. We went from the 20th/21st century and Sproul to the 18th century and Edwards *all* the way back to the 4th and 5th centuries and Augustine. And, of course, I acknowledge there are *many* outstanding Christian theologians and philosophers in-between. Believe me, I am aware of Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther and John Calvin and so on. But again, my point today is, these are three we will lean on beginning, well, tomorrow!

I cannot just mention St. Augustine's dates of birth and death and leave his short bio at that. Absolutely not! I have to tell you more about him. But, I am soon going to run out of time. So, be back next time when I will tell you some more about who Augustine was and how he will instruct us, as he instructed Jonathan Edwards and RC Sproul. You see how this works. We stand on the shoulders of these giants tomorrow because God Is!

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