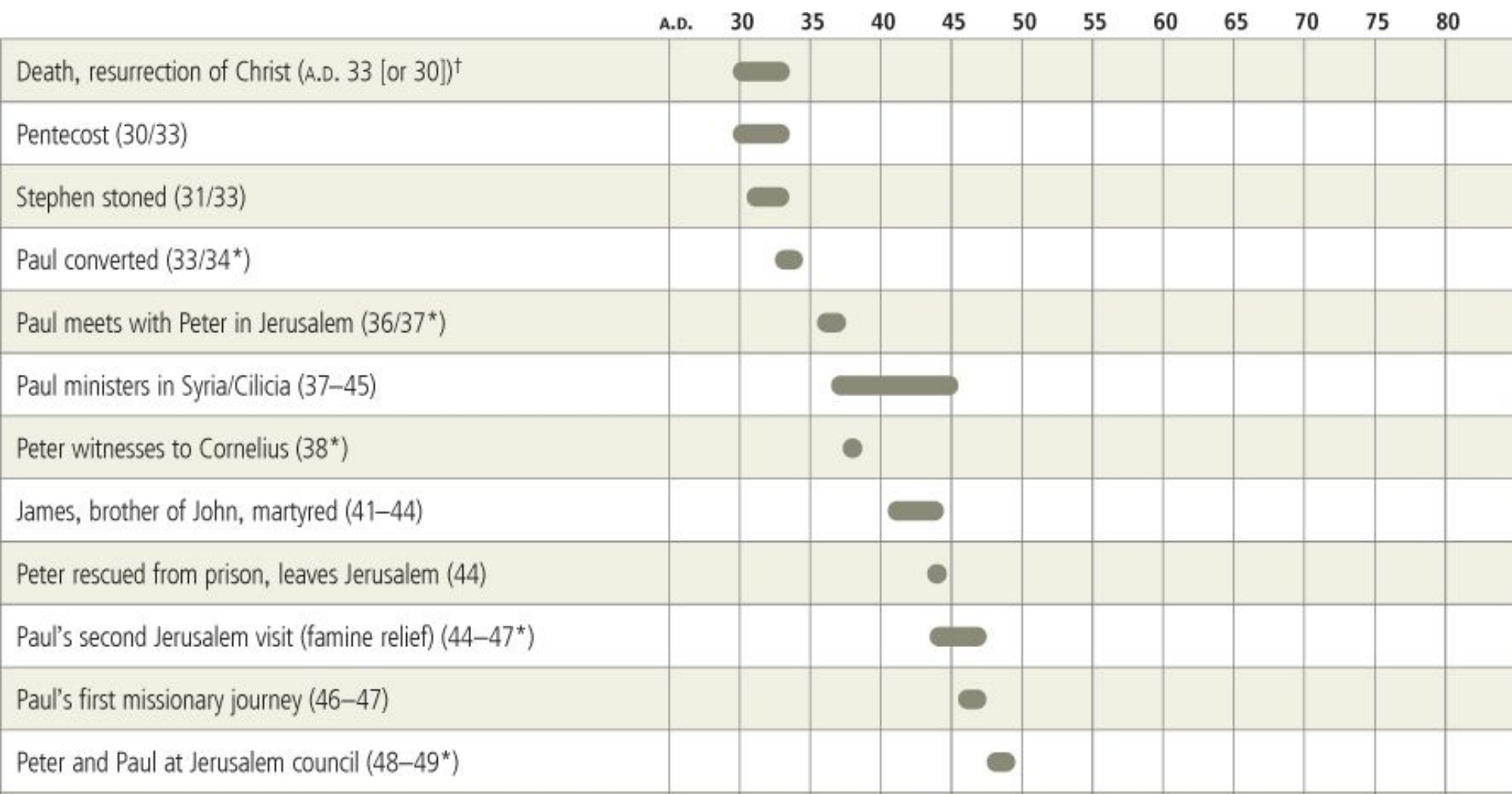


Paul and Barnabas in Iconium

Acts 14:1-7

“Physical strength is the most important thing in life. This is true whether we want it to be or not....This reality is offensive to some people who would like the intellectual or spiritual to take precedence. It is instructive to see what happens to these very people as their squat strength goes up.”

Mark Rippetoe, *Starting Strength*







Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.

Acts 14:1-3

But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, and there they continued to preach the gospel.

Acts 14:4-7

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Theology? I don't need theology...

God and man, or God's sovereignty and human responsibility



Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed.

Acts 14:1

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.

Acts 13:48

One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

Acts 16:14

Ἀκούοντα δὲ τὰ ἔθνη ἔχαιρον καὶ

when they heard and the Gentiles they began rejoicing and

ἐδόξαζον τὸν λόγον τοῦ κυρίου καὶ ἐπίστευσαν

they began glorifying the word of the Lord and they believed

ὅσοι ἦσαν τεταγμένοι εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον·

as many as were appointed to life eternal.

Acts 13:48

“Throughout Acts we have seen Luke’s emphasis on God’s plan and sovereign hand guiding the circumstances in the life of Jesus and then in the life of the church, and here we are told that the Gentiles who came to faith were already within God’s predetermined plan. This is certainly as strong a statement about predestination as one finds in Luke-Acts.”

Ben Witherington, 416

Now although theologians take great interest in the “problem” of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, it is not one of the main concerns of the biblical writers, although they are aware of it. Just as it is plain to them that God controls everything, so it is plain to them that he is the ultimate authority. Therefore, to the biblical writers, we are answerable to God for our attitudes, thoughts, words, and actions. Everything we think and do—indeed, everything we are—brings God’s commendation or condemnation. Even actions like eating and drinking, which we might consider to be ethically neutral or “adiaphora,” must be done to God’s

glory (1 Cor. 10:31). Whatever we do should be done thankfully, in Jesus' name (Col. 3:17), with all our heart (v. 23). Everything that does not come from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). Practically every page of Scripture displays God's sovereign evaluations of human attitudes, thoughts, words, and deeds.

Indeed, we are even responsible for our moral nature. Comparing bad trees to bad people, Jesus says that the bad trees will bring forth bad fruit and will therefore be cut down and thrown into the fire (Matt. 7:15-20; cf. Luke 6:43-45).

Paul teaches that because of Adam's sin, his descendants were made sinners (Rom. 5:19), and that natural sinfulness, with which we are born, leads to our condemnation (vv. 15-18) if God does not bless us with saving grace. We are responsible for what we are. We did not individually make ourselves evil by nature, but we are responsible for that evil anyway. Our inheritance from Adam is not the result of our individual choice, but we must bear the guilt of it.

Furthermore, we are responsible to seek salvation. We must make a decision to serve the Lord (Josh. 24:15-24).

We must receive Christ (John 1:12); we must believe in him (John 3:16; 6:40); we must repent, believe, and be baptized (Acts 2:38). As we have seen, God chooses us before we choose him; his choice brings ours about. But we must choose, nevertheless; and if we do not make the right choice, we will not be saved.

So we are responsible for everything we are and do. On the whole, the biblical writers see no problem in affirming both total divine sovereignty and complete human responsibility. In Romans 9, Paul does cite an imaginary objector who

questions the justice of God (v. 14) and says, “Why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?” (v. 19). But Paul replies, “But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?”’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?” (vv. 20-21). Earlier, Paul quoted Exodus 33:19: God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy. But such debates in Scripture are rare. For the most part, the Bible sets forth God’s involvement in everything and affirms the responsibility of all moral agents, without

suggesting that there is any conflict between these two teachings.

It is significant that Scripture often affirms both divine sovereignty and human responsibility in the same passage. As we saw, Genesis 50:20 rebukes the wicked intent of Joseph's brothers, but also mentions the good intention of God in bringing about Joseph's ministry in Egypt. We also discussed Isaiah 10:5-15, where God uses the Assyrian king as his tool to punish Israel; nevertheless, the Assyrian is wicked, and he must take responsibility: "When the Lord has

finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, ‘I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes’” (v. 12). Note the parallel in Proverbs:

The LORD works out everything for his own ends—
even the wicked for a day of disaster.

The LORD detests all the proud of heart.

Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished. (Prov. 16:4-5)

God raises up the wicked for the day of disaster, but they are nonetheless responsible for their wickedness and shall not go

unpunished.

In 1 Kings 8:58, Solomon prays that God will “turn our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways.” Then he exhorts Israel, “But your hearts must be fully committed to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time” (v. 61; cf. Jer. 29:10-14).

Jesus also shows us both sides of the matter: “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37). Notice also that balance in John 1 between verse 12 and verse 13:

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

It is God who gives new birth, but those who are born of God accept the responsibility to receive Christ and believe in his name.

Scripture curses the wicked men who betrayed and crucified Jesus, but it also traces their actions to the decree of God (Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28).

The evangelistic work of the early church was the work of God, but it was also the product of human preaching. Acts 13:48, as we saw earlier, mentions that “all who were appointed for eternal life believed,” but 14:1 attributes faith to the preaching of Paul and Barnabas: “There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.” In Romans 9, Paul attributes the unbelief of Israel to God’s sovereign working, but in chapter 10 he attributes it to Israel’s unwillingness to respond to the preaching of the gospel (vv. 14-21, especially v. 21). Paul does not hesitate, indeed, to say that it is his responsibility to “win as many as

possible” (1 Cor. 9:19; cf. vv. 20-22), and even that “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (v. 22). As post-Reformation Christians, we tend to be uncomfortable with such language. We want to say, “No, it’s God who saves, not human preachers.” But elsewhere Paul asks, “How can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Rom. 10:14). Human preachers must seek nothing less than the salvation of the lost, recognizing all the time that no one will be saved unless God works through them.

Throughout Paul’s missionary labors, God’s sovereignty

governs what happens, but Paul gives himself to the most rigorous exertions (2 Cor. 4:7-12; 11:23-33). In Acts 27, during Paul's journey to Rome as a prisoner, he prophesies danger to the ship (v. 10). During the storm, he says on God's authority (v. 24) that no one on the ship will die (cf. v. 34). But when sailor's try to escape in a lifeboat, Paul says that "unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved" (v. 31). So God has determined that all will live, yet the sailors must take responsibility for this deliverance.

The Christian life is the work of God in us, but it is also our effort to withstand temptation and obey the Lord: "Continue to

work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). In this passage, Paul not only brings the two emphases together, but shows their relationship to each other. We work *because* God works in us.

The New Testament often presents the Christian life in terms of an indicative and an imperative. The indicative emphasizes the sovereign work of God, and the imperative emphasizes our obligation, our responsibility. For example, in Colossians 3:1-3, we read:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

“You have been raised” is the indicative; “set your hearts on things above” is the imperative. God raised us; we could not have raised ourselves. But Paul expects us to make a decision to give priority in our hearts and minds to the affairs of God. The Christian life is a wonderful gift of God, but it is also a spiritual battle that warrants great exertions. As in

Philippians 2:12-13, the sovereign gift of God motivates our exertions. Never in Scripture is there any hint that God's sovereignty should encourage passivity or sloth.

The book of Revelation shows over and over the wrath of God poured out upon Satan and his hosts. Satan is responsible for what he does. Nevertheless, God is on the throne. He anticipates what Satan does and limits it according to his plan.

Why do the biblical writers find it so natural to bring these themes together, a conjunction that seems so paradoxical to

modern readers? Why does Paul in Philippians 2:12-13 actually appeal to God's sovereign working in order to motivate our responsible activity? Here are some suggestions as to why this linkage makes sense in the context of a biblical worldview:

....

5. Scripture is therefore not nearly as concerned as we are to promote our self-esteem. We would like to believe that the meaning and significance of our lives depend on what we do for ourselves, without any outside influences or

constraints. In Scripture, however, the goal of human life is to glorify God. Our dignity is to be found not in what we do, but in what God has done for us and in us. Our meaning and significance are to be found in the fact that God has created us in his image and redeemed us by the blood of his Son. The biblical writers, therefore, are not horrified, as modern writers tend to be, by the thought that we may be under the control of another. If the other is God, and he has made us for his glory, then we could not possibly ask for a more meaningful existence.

John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 120-125

Regarding “foreknowledge”:

But which choice comes first? Does God choose us for salvation and then move us to respond, or do we first choose him and thereby motivate him to choose us for salvation?

The second alternative is quite impossible, since it violates the very idea of grace. If our choosing of God moves him to save us, then salvation is based on a work of ours, and we have something to boast about.

Furthermore, God’s choosing took place in eternity past, before anyone was even conceived. Before we began to

exist, God's plan for us was fully formulated. We can no more change God's decision than we can change our grandparents.

Arminian theology, nevertheless, asserts that God chooses us because he knows in advance that we will choose to believe in him. On this view, our choice is the cause, and God's choice is the effect. We are the first cause, and God is the second. Some have supported this understanding by appealing to Romans 8:29 and 1 Peter 1:2, which say that election is based on "foreknowledge." But the

foreknowledge in these passages is not God's foreknowledge that we will choose him. Often in the biblical languages, as in English, when the verb *know* has a noun rather than a fact-clause as its object, it refers to a personal relationship, not a knowledge of information. (n. 32. This is the difference between "knowing him" and "knowing that." For example, consider the difference between "I know Bill" and "I know that Bill is forty-three years old.") In Psalm 1:6, for example, we learn that "the Lord watches over [Heb. *knows*] the way of the righteous." This does not simply mean that God knows what the righteous are doing, which would be rather obvious, but

that he guards and keeps them. Compare Amos 3:2:

You only have I chosen [Heb. *known*]
of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you
for all your sins.

The NIV's translation, "chosen," is correct. God is not confessing ignorance of all the families of the earth other than Israel. Rather, he is claiming a special covenant relationship with Israel. (Cf. Hos. 13:4; Matt. 25:12; John 10:14; Rom. 11:2 ["foreknew"]; 1 Cor. 8:3; 1 Thess. 5:12 [where *know* is

translated “chosen”].) So in Romans 8:29, when Paul says that God “foreknew” believers, this means that he established a personal relationship with them (from all eternity, according to Eph. 1:4-5). The Greek word translated “foreknew” could also be translated “befriended” or even “chose” or “elected.”

So Scripture teaches all believers, as Jesus taught his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last” (John 15:16). God’s choice precedes our choice, our response, our faith. How could it be otherwise, considering everything we have already observed about God’s sovereignty throughout

nature, history, and human life in general? Can the choice to believe in Christ be the one choice that is beyond God's control? Is salvation the one area in which we should *not* give God the praise?

John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 71-72

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Acts 14:4-7

“Evangelism is man’s work, but the giving of faith is God’s [work].”

J. I. Packer

Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God, 40

“[W]e see at once why it was that Paul, who faced so realistically the fact of fallen man’s slavery to sin and Satan, was able to avoid the disillusionment and discouragement that we feel today as it dawns upon us more and more clearly that, humanly speaking, evangelism is a hopeless task. The reason was that Paul kept his eyes firmly fixed on the sovereignty of God in grace.”

J. I. Packer

Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God, 115