

The Sovereignty of God

What is meant when we speak of the sovereignty of God? First of all we mean that God has supremacy of authority or rule. There is no authority above Him. God is the supreme authority in all Heaven and Earth. In this study we shall seek to learn the extent of God's sovereignty, the exercise of God's sovereignty, and how God's sovereignty and man's will relate.

The Absolute Sovereignty of God

There is one thing we must be assured of: God is absolutely sovereign. There is no authority above Him. *"There is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God."* (Rom 13:1) (KJV) God is the ultimate authority and the source of all other authority.

God's sovereignty is over all of Creation. There is neither one thing nor one person that is not under His authority. Whether it is the weather or the heart of one who is a powerful person, God is the authority over all of them. *"Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honour come of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. Now therefore, our God, we thank thee, and praise thy glorious name."* (1 Chron 29:11-13) (KJV) *"The LORD most high is terrible; he is a great King over all the earth."* (Ps 47:2) (KJV) *"The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will."* (Prov 21:1) (KJV) *"I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things."* (Isa 45:7) (KJV) *"The LORD is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked: the LORD hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebuketh the sea, and maketh it dry, and drieth up all the rivers: Bashan languisheth, and Carmel, and the flower of Lebanon languisheth. The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt, and the earth is burned at his presence, yea, the world, and all that dwell therein. Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger? his fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him. The LORD is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him. But with an overrunning flood he will make an utter end of the place thereof, and darkness shall pursue his enemies."* (Nah 1:3-8) (KJV)

God's sovereignty is also one that cannot be thwarted. He used the prophets to say: *"He is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth."* (Job 23:13) (KJV) *"Yea, before the day was I am he; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand: I will work, and who shall let it?"* (Isa 43:13) (KJV) *"Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure: Calling a ravenous bird from the east, the man that executeth my counsel from a far country: yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it."* (Isa 46:9-11) (KJV) *"All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and*

he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?" (Dan 4:35) (KJV)

God's sovereignty is not an arbitrary rule in this world, but a ruling that is according to the good pleasure of His loving and holy nature: *"Our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased." (Ps 115:3) (KJV) "Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places." (Ps 135:6) (KJV)* Paul the apostle also spoke of *"him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." (Eph 1:11) (KJV)* While God works His will in this world, He does it in a manner that is pleasing to His loving and holy character. In all things, however, God is the King of kings and Lord of lords. *"In his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen." (1 Tim 6:15-16) (KJV)*

Divine Sovereignty and Providence

The doctrine of Divine sovereignty is a great comfort to those who understand that God's sovereignty is always linked with His providential care for His people. What is providence? Providence speaks of God's foresight, forethought, and plan to care for His people. Paul stated that, *"we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." (Rom 8:28) (KJV)* It is only logical to understand that the sovereignty of God is the only way by which He could providentially cause all things to work together for our good.

Solomon spoke of God's sovereign providence when he said, *"A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps." (Prov 16:9) (KJV)* As we live our lives we make plans, but our plans are often not wise. Thankfully, God cares for His children and, in sovereign love, directs our lives so that we benefit from His great love instead of destroying ourselves. David stated, *"The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand." (Ps 37:23,24) (KJV)* What a blessing it is to know that God is not only watching over our lives, but is actively involved in holding us up in spite of our often falling.

Divine providence often leads us through paths that we don't understand. Life is often difficult, dark, and perplexing. In the midst of this we must understand that God's providence is still real. The Psalmist understood this when he said, *"Thou, O God, hast proved us: thou hast tried us, as silver is tried. Thou broughtest us into the net; thou laidst affliction upon our loins. Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water: but thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place." (Ps 66:10-12) (KJV)* Sometimes God, in His providence, sends us through hard trials that we might be purified and made holy. At other times we are caused to suffer grief and heartache at the hands of other people. It is often as though we are deluged with trouble, or burned in the flame. Life is often extremely difficult. In these dark times we are often tempted to think that God has forsaken us. He has not. He is still caring for us, and, in the end, will bring us through our trials having made us better and happier servants of His. In spite of this wonderful assurance, we often think that we must immediately understand all that is happening to us. May God help us to remember the wise statement

of Solomon, *“Man's goings are of the LORD; how can a man then understand his own way?” (Prov 20:24) (KJV)* We simply cannot see into the mind of God. We must trust Him as David did when He said, *“I will cry unto God most high; unto God that performeth all things for me.” (Ps 57:2) (KJV)*

There is no doubt that Joseph understood the providence of God. It is only because of Joseph's faith in God's providential care that he could forgive and comfort his brothers who had sinned against him. After the death of Jacob, his father, Joseph's brothers came declaring that Jacob had left word for Joseph to forgive his brothers. Joseph's reply was, *“Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them.” (Gen 50:19-21) (KJV)* One can only do that if they have faith in the overruling sovereignty of God and His providence. What a great help it would be to all of us if we would but repent of bitterness and resentment and embrace the fact that God is at work in our lives even when times are the most difficult.

Divine Sovereignty and Sin

As we study this great truth we find ourselves questioning the issue of sin. Did God create sin? Does God condone sin? After all, it seems that He uses sin to further His purposes. Joseph told his brothers that God used their sin to accomplish good.

The first thing we must notice is that God by no means condones or creates sin. The scriptures declare that *“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:5) (KJV)* The God of all creation is righteous with no sin about Him. The Psalmist stated, *“Thou lovest righteousness, and hatest wickedness.” (Ps 45:7) (KJV)* God despises sin. Not only is this so, but God does not condone sin in any fashion. *“Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man.” (James 1:13) (KJV)* God does not in any manner create, encourage, or condone sin.

What do we do, then, with statements such as the following? *“I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things.” (Isa 45:7) (KJV)* *“Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it?” (Amos 3:6) (KJV)* One important thing to keep in mind is the fact that there is more than one sort of evil. There is moral and ethical evil, and then there is evil which is nothing more than the difficulties and tragedies of life. When the prophets spoke of evil coming from the hand of God, they were saying that He controls the world and that the good or the bad happenings are in His control. Remember that Nahum said, *“The LORD hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.” (Nah 1:3) (KJV)* Whether it is an earthquake, or a hurricane, God is in control. Yes, these things are evils in the sense that they are horrifying events. Insurance companies still call these “acts of God.” The reason that they do so is because they know that the occurrences of natural catastrophes are beyond human control. They are, however, in the control of God. *“Who is he that saith, and it cometh to pass, when the Lord commandeth it not? Out of the mouth of the most High proceedeth not evil and good?” (Lam 3:37,38) (KJV)* Everything that occurs in this world does so because of the decree of God. Destruction and its attending heartache are no exceptions.

Now we are faced with another question. How does God not approve of evil, nor create sin if all things happen because of His command? This question is a valid question that certainly needs to be addressed. This writer is convinced that evil occurs because God allows it to happen. God's decree does not necessarily demand His *active* participation in a deed. God simply commanded/ordained that sin and evil be allowed to occur since men could make such a choice for their lives. In so doing, God would still retain control over the world and men would have a great deal of choice in their lives. In other words, God did not decree that Adam sin without Adam's choosing to sin. Neither did God encourage and condone Adam's sin. Rather, God decreed that Adam would have the choice between sinning and doing rightly. Knowing that Adam would choose to sin, God ordained that Adam would be *allowed* to do so.

As we consider this decree of God to allow sin but not approve of it, let us notice an instance where it did indeed happen in life. The man is Balaam. He is a prophet of sorts. He is called by a wicked king, Balak, to curse the children of Israel. There's a lucrative offer made to Balaam if he will only come and pronounce a curse from God on Israel. God's command to Balaam is, "don't go." (See Num 23:12) Balak's men return with another lucrative offer. Balaam seems to desire to go, even though he declares that he can only do what God tells him to do and can only speak what God tells him to speak. In fact, this time, Balaam even gets permission from God to go. (See Num 23:20) There is a problem, though. The will of God had already been expressed to Balaam. God did not desire for Balaam to go. God had revealed His will. Now, however, God is *allowing/permitting* Balaam to go to Balak, although it is not the desire of God that Balaam do so. As we read further in the chapter we find that God stops Balaam on the road and shows Balaam his error. Although Balaam is still allowed to go, we find that God only allowed it and did not endorse Balaam's going to Balak. Balaam sinned by going, yet God permitted that sin. I believe that this shows us the fact that God's command concerning sin is not His directly being involved in sin, but His permitting men to make their own foolish choices in life.

Another instance in which this can be seen is in the fact that God wills/desires that all men be saved; yet not all are saved. Consider the following verses: "*Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.*" (1 Tim 2:4) (KJV) "*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*" (2 Peter 3:9) (KJV) God desires the salvation of all. All are not saved, however. In fact, some are spoken of as being ordained to destruction. "*For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.*" (Jude 4) (KJV) "*Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.*" (1 Peter 2:7,8) (KJV) "*The LORD hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil.*" (Prov 16:4) (KJV) Most serious Bible believers hold to the truth that God does indeed desire that all be saved and sincerely offers the Gospel to mankind. Yet the Bible teaches that there are some who are ordained to judgment and condemnation. How? Why? They are ordained of God to condemnation

because God *knew* that they would refuse to honor God. While God reveals His hatred for sin and His desire that all be saved from sin, He forces no one to be saved. This being so, God *permits* men to choose sin and continue in it to their destruction.

Finally, we should consider the sovereignty of God in relation to the sin of other people and its effects upon us. Many times people ask, “Why does God permit (fill in the blank with any specific tragedy)?” At other times it is asked, “Why does God do things such as this?” One Jewish rabbi wrote a book about bad things happening to “good people.” All of these questions miss the true issue. The issue is not whether bad things happen (they do). It is not about God doing the bad things (He doesn’t). It is not altogether about God permitting those things (although He does). The real issue is that all of us are sinners, not good people.

All of us are sinners who do not deserve good from God. *“All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” (Rom 3:23) (KJV)* All of us are under the judgment of God. *“We know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.” (Rom 3:19) (KJV)* *“You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.... and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.” (Eph 2:1,3b) (KJV)* We were destined to face the wrath of God. We do not deserve the good that happens to us. Now, those of us who are saved do indeed have hope and assurance that things are well between us and God. On the other hand, we are still in a world that is sinful. *“The creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.” (Rom 8:20-23) (KJV)* All of creation is subject to futility, emptiness, and sorrow. Rape, murder, torture, war crimes, domestic violence, wrecks caused by drunken drivers, cancer, heart disease, and all other ills of this world are the result of Adam’s sin. All of creation is filled with the turmoil that came into the world because of man’s sin. Man *chose* to sin. God didn’t make that choice for him; man made the choice for himself. Man knew that trouble, pain, and death would be the result of sin, yet he sins even today. Thankfully, there is the promise of a future deliverance from all sorrow. One day Jesus Himself shall return to this Earth and change the whole world into a place of peace and righteousness. *“We, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” (2 Peter 3:13) (KJV)*

Concluding Remarks

It is very difficult to address every question and objection to a truth that is as great as this. There is no way to righteously overlook, or treat lightly, the pain, sorrow, and suffering of people in this life. I do trust, however, that the glorious truth that God is in control will cause someone to look upward and place their confidence in Him, knowing that He alone holds the future in His hands. Most objections to this truth are emotional objections. That being so, we would do well to consider the wise words of a man who lived a life of depression, yet chose to trust in the sovereignty of God:

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.*

God Moves In A Mysterious Way

William Cowper