

LESSON THREE

God's Sovereignty over People

(Chapter 4)

CENTRAL IDEA

God works in the hearts of people to move them to fulfill His purposes. Any treatment, good or bad, that we receive from another can be seen as part of God's plan for us.

Examining Trust

We are, from a human point of view, often at the mercy of other people and their decisions or actions. Sometimes those decisions or actions are benevolent and good; sometimes they are wicked or careless. Either way they do affect us, often in a significant way. How are we to respond when we find ourselves seemingly in the hands of someone else, when we desperately need a favorable decision or a favorable action on that person's part? Can we trust God that He can and will work in the heart of that individual to bring about His plan for us?

Or consider the instance when someone is out to harm us, to ruin our reputation, or to jeopardize our career: Can we trust God to intervene in the heart of that person so that he does not carry out his evil intent? According to the Bible, the answer in

both instances is yes.

Perhaps the clearest biblical statement that God does sovereignly influence the decisions of people is found in [Proverbs 21:1](#): “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.” The stubborn will of the most powerful monarch on earth is directed by God as easily as the farmer directs the flow of water in his irrigation canals. The argument, then, is from the greater to the lesser—if God controls the king’s heart, surely He controls everyone else’s.

God can and does move in the hearts of people to show favor to us when that favor will accomplish His purpose. Furthermore, when necessary, God restrains people from decisions or actions that would harm us. Of course, God does not always restrain the wicked and harmful actions of others toward His people. We do not know why God sometimes allows our enemies to prevail and sometimes restrains them. It is enough to know that God can and does restrain the harmful acts of others toward us when that is His sovereign will.

You can trust God in all the areas of your life where you are dependent upon the favor or frown of another person. God will move in that person’s heart to carry out His will for you.

The Bible asserts both God’s sovereignty and people’s freedom and moral responsibility, but it never attempts to explain their relationship. For one thing, God is infinite in His ways as

well as His being. A finite mind simply cannot comprehend an infinite being beyond what He has expressly revealed to us. Because of this, some things about God will forever remain a mystery to us. The relationship of the sovereign will of God to the freedom and moral responsibility of people is one of those mysteries.

We must also keep in mind that God is never the author of sin. Though people's sinful intents and actions serve the sovereign purpose of God, we must never conclude that God has induced anyone to sin. God judges people for the very sins that He uses to carry out His purpose.

The Bible consistently portrays people as making real choices of their own will. The choices people make are moral choices; that is, people are held accountable by God for the choices they make. God works without violating or coercing people's will; rather He works in His mysterious way through their wills to accomplish His purposes.

There are some cautions we need to consider, lest we wrongly use the doctrine of God's sovereignty over people.

First, we should never use the doctrine as an excuse for our own shortcomings.

Second, we should not allow the doctrine of God's sovereignty to cause us to respond passively to the actions of other people that affect us. The doctrine of God's sovereignty should never be used to promote passivity.

Third, we must never use the doctrine of God's sovereignty to excuse our own sinful actions or decisions that hurt another person. (Taken from chapter 4 of *Trusting God*.)

Developing Trust

1. Examine the following Scriptures for evidence of God's work in the hearts of believers and unbelievers. Record the key words used to describe His working.

- [Ezra 1:1, 5; 6:22](#)
- [Proverbs 21:1](#)
- [Daniel 1:9](#)
- [2 Corinthians 8:16–17](#)
- [Deuteronomy 2:30](#)
- [Joshua 11:20](#)

2. Read [Exodus 4:21](#) and [8:15](#).

- a. Who is given the responsibility for Pharaoh's hard heart in each of these verses?
- b. How do these verses, taken side by side, help us see the relationship between man's responsibility and God's work in our hearts?

3. God's restraining influence on people's actions and decisions is seen in the following verses. Complete the chart.

What action did God prevent?	What emotion did God influence?
Genesis 20:1-7	
Genesis 35:5	
Exodus 34:23-24	

4. According to the following verses, how do the sinful actions of man affect God's purposes?

- [Genesis 50:20](#)

- Acts 4:27–28
- Revelation 17:15–18

5. Do you agree that a finite mind cannot comprehend an infinite Being beyond what He has expressly revealed? Why or why not?
6. a. God can and does work in the minds and hearts of people to accomplish His will. How should that truth affect your attitude?

b. How should that truth affect the way you pray about your job or other concerns?
7. Why should confidence in God's sovereignty in the lives of people keep us from becoming resentful and bitter when we are treated unjustly or maliciously by others?
8. a. Describe a time when you were treated unfairly.

- b. How did you react?
 - c. To what extent did your reaction show trust in God?
 - d. Would you like your response to be different next time? If so, how?
 - e. What was the end result of the situation?
 - f. What good, if any, came from this situation?
9. What are some specific things you can pray for in your own life this week, knowing that God can work in people's hearts?
- 10.a. Describe a time recently when you were affected by someone else's decision or action.

- b. At the time how did you feel about the situation?
- c. How do you feel now about the outcome of the situation?
- d. Does your study of God's sovereignty in the hearts of people affect your perspective on what happened? How?

Trust in Action

1. Memorize [Deuteronomy 29:29](#) or [Proverbs 21:1](#).
2. Think of three people you know who need to turn to the Lord. Ask the Lord to work in their hearts.
3. Are there people who have treated you unfairly whom you have not forgiven? Spend some time with the Lord, asking Him to cleanse you of all bitterness toward others. Pray [Psalm 51:10](#).

LESSON FOUR

God's Rule over the Nations

(Chapter 5)

CENTRAL IDEA

God is in control of all nations, shaping events and decisions to fulfill His purposes.

Examining Trust

As we trace the sovereignty of God through the Bible, one of the most frequent references to it concerns His sovereignty over nations and governments. God is Lord over all of human history, and He is working out all the details of that history, as Paul said in [Ephesians 1:11](#), “in conformity with the purpose of his will.” That is, God makes all events of history; all the decisions of rulers, kings, and parliaments; and all the actions of their governments, armies, and navies serve His will.

The fact that God is sovereign over our rulers is usually not evident to us as we view their decisions and actions on a human plane. For the most part, governmental officials and legislative bodies do their work quite apart from any intent to carry out the will of God. We see this amply demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken. This required Joseph and Mary to go to the town of Bethlehem to register at just the right time for the Messiah to be

born in Bethlehem in fulfillment of Micah's prophecy (see [Micah 5:2](#)). Caesar certainly did not intend to be an instrument to fulfill any Jewish prophecy, yet that is exactly what he was.

We should likewise see in those affairs reported in our daily paper the sovereign hand of God just as much as we see it in the Bible. Of course, we don't have the advantage of the divinely revealed explanation of today's events, as we do of those recorded in the Bible, but that does not make God's sovereign rule today any less certain. God recorded in His Word specific instances of His sovereign rule over history in order that we might trust Him in the affairs of history as they unfold before us today.

The Scriptures teach the following specific truths about the sovereignty of God over the nations:

- God in His sovereignty has established government for the good of all people—believers as well as unbelievers (see [Romans 13:1-4](#)).
- God determines who rules in those governments (see [Daniel 4:17](#)).
- God determines the timing of each leader's rule (see [Isaiah 40:23-24](#)).
- God controls the decisions that rulers make (see [Proverbs 16:33](#)).
- God rules in the victories and defeats between nations on

the battlefield (see [Proverbs 21:31](#)).

God sometimes causes government leaders or officials to make foolish decisions in order to bring judgment upon a nation. We should take more seriously our responsibility to pray for the leaders of our government that they will make wise decisions. Although we may suspect that some of the more disastrous decisions are evidence of God's judgment, we do not know that. We do know God has instructed us to pray for leaders. Our duty, then, is to pray for wise decisions, but to trust God when foolish and harmful decisions are made.

As we look around the world today, what do we see? We see over one-half of the world's population living in countries whose governments are hostile to the gospel, where missionaries are not allowed, and where national Christians are severely hindered from proclaiming Christ. As we look at these conditions we must also look at the sovereignty of God and at His promises. He has promised to redeem people from every nation, and He has commanded us to make disciples of all nations. We must, then, trust God by praying. Some will go to those nations as God opens doors, but all of us must pray. We must learn to trust God, not only in the adverse circumstances of our individual lives, but also in the adverse circumstances of the church as a whole.

God is sovereign over the nations. He is sovereign over the

officials of our own government in all their actions as they affect us directly. He is sovereign over the officials of government in lands where our brothers and sisters in Christ suffer for their faith in Him. And He is sovereign over the nations where every attempt is made to stamp out true Christianity. In all of these areas, we can and must trust God. (Taken from chapter 5 of *Trusting God*.)

Developing Trust

1. There are many events that took place during the life of Jesus that show how government officials, acting freely, fulfilled the purposes of God. Fill in the following chart.

Name of ruler	Official action	Prophecy fulfilled
Matthew 2:13–16	Hosea 11:1	
Matthew 2:17–18	Jeremiah 31:15	
Matthew 2:21–23	Isaiah 9:1	
Luke 2:1–4	Micah 5:2	
Acts 4:27–28	Isaiah 53:3–6	

2. What truths are taught about governments and rulers in the following verses?
 - Proverbs 16:9, 33

- Proverbs 21:31
- Isaiah 40:22–24
- Daniel 4:17
- Daniel 4:31–32
- Romans 13:1–4

3. What responsibilities do we have toward our government?

- Romans 13:1–7
- 1 Timothy 2:1–4

4. a. Describe a time in your life when a governmental decision had an effect on your life (for example, military draft, new tax laws, zoning regulation, or so forth).

- b. To what extent did you see God's hand in the events at the time?
 - c. From your present perspective, what do you think God was doing in that situation?
5. a. Read [2 Samuel 15:1–16](#) and [16:20–17:14](#). Why did God want Absalom to follow the poor advice of Hushai?
- b. What might be God's purpose in allowing rulers to make foolish decisions?
 - c. Does God protect His people from the consequences of these poor decisions? Why or why not?
6. According to [Daniel 9:1–19](#), what was Daniel's response when he realized that Israel's exile in Babylon was almost over?

7. a. What is promised in the following verses?

- [Matthew 28:18-20](#)
- [Revelation 7:9-10](#)

b. How can you respond to these promises?

8. a. What are your general thoughts about the present world situation?

b. Did the truths in this chapter change your perspective on current events? If so, how?

Trust in Action

1. Spend some time with the Lord doing some soul searching about your role in the political process of your country. Is God prompting you to a deeper involvement?
2. Write to your government representatives letting them know what you think about some issue currently being

debated.

3. Choose several world leaders and make a commitment to pray regularly for them. Make an effort to read articles about these leaders and their lives.
4. Choose one group of missionaries and pray regularly for them. Or choose one nation that is currently hostile to the gospel and pray regularly that God will open doors in that country.
5. Memorize [Psalm 33:16–17](#).