

God's Sovereignty

By Dennis Cornish

The Sovereignty of God is quite simply the fact that His overarching governance extends over all of His creation and over all events and outcomes. In Psalms 103:19 we read that: *"The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all."*

The phrase 'God is sovereign' is so deeply engrained in the Christian's life that we sometimes gloss over its full meaning. If we truly believe these words, we must live out the reality of their inclusiveness in the good and bad that comes to us in life. The book of Job is a good place to begin to understand the sovereignty of God when we read Job's telling words when he spoke to his grieving wife after she told him to *"curse God and die"*, *"You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?"* Although Job did not comprehend why God allowed these calamities to befall him, *"In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong."* This is an important statement; Job did not charge God with wrong because God is not the author of evil and later, we will speak to the theological concept of concurrence and that may clarify the questions that may arise out of this seemingly inharmonious contrast.

It would be good to remember that as Christians, who have truly repented of our sin, that not any part of suffering that we may experience is a result of judicial punishment for our sin, that punishment was imputed to Christ and He has paid the ransom for all our sin. That being said, even though we are now clothed in Christ's righteousness, our suffering may be a loving discipline as a result or consequence of our sin, and if that is the case its functional intent is for the purpose of our sanctification as we continue to grow in Christ. One Christian author, in his book 'Show Me Your Glory', stated it this way: *"In the lowest ebb of life, we may remain confident that God will use these difficulties to sanctify us."* If we believe that God is sovereign over all things, then we must accept that He is sovereign over our suffering and that He has ordained it for a specific purpose even though that purpose may remain an unknown mystery as we struggle through it.

The acceptance of God's sovereignty in all things is a prerequisite to our being able to fully trust in the work and purpose of Christ in our lives. Even as the second person of the Triune Godhead, Jesus acknowledged God the Father's sovereign will in all things when in His deep sorrow at the prospect of the cross before Him, while still in the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed: *"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."* Our Lord and Savior acquiesced to giving up His earthly life and took upon Himself the full extent of God's wrath for all mankind's sins because of the covenant of redemption which God put into place before the creation of the universe.

The sovereignty of God is one of many of His attributes, and the combination of them all are characteristic traits that are perfectly and wholly present at any given moment. God's essence cannot be fully defined by any one of His characteristic attributes over and above any other, He is at once, and for all eternity, each and every one of them simultaneously. He is not the God of wrath, any more or any less than He is the God of love, there is *"no variation or shadow of change within Him (James 1:17)"*, He is immutably consistent in His being.

A perfect example is to look at the cross, it is the confluence of God's fearsome wrath and the fullness of His divine love, both absolutely present at the moment of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16)"*.

I quoted earlier from James 1, and we read from verses 16-17, these words: *"Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."* In Ephesians 1:11 we are further taught that: *"in Him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will."* John Calvin says in his commentary on James: "To do good is what properly belongs to [God], and it is according to his nature..."

That being said, we need to consider how we should reconcile the evil in the world with God's goodness. We have already established that God is good and that in His

unchanging nature, He can do no evil, and yet we also know that in God's sovereign providence in all things that we must acknowledge that He is in full control of all that happens and that nothing takes place that is contrary to His eternal, sovereign decree.

We know that after the Fall, in Genesis 6:5, *"the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually"*. Out of this fact, and through God's mercy and justice, comes the doctrine of concurrence, and this theological concept is where God works out His sovereignty, His supreme freedom, through man's real choices, or in other words, the freedom of man's will. Simply put, this is where God uses the evil intent of men to affect a righteous end for His glory. It should be noted that although God uses men's evil intent to bring about His divine purpose, God's sovereignty does not nullify our own personal responsibility for the sinful things that we do. An example of this is found in Isaiah 10:5 where God pronounces a woe on Assyria, the godless pagan nation that He would use to bring His divine judgement against His rebellious people in the kingdom of Judah. God's pronouncement of woe came at the same time He called the Assyrians *'the rod of My anger'* and saying that they were *'the staff in whose hand is My indignation'*. In their quest to overthrow Israel, the Assyrians unknowingly became God's instrument of judgement, but their evil intent on conquering Israel, and the slaughter that they would inflict, would bring them squarely under God's righteous judgement for their culpability in the atrocity of their evil actions.

Another good example of concurrence would be Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery. His brothers sold him for their own evil purpose, but God meant it for good and used their evil act as a means for Joseph's eventual rise to a position of power within the Egyptian kingdom to save it, along with his own father, brothers, and many other people from the fate of starvation. Joseph rightly told his brothers that: *"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."* Joseph's brothers, and others in Scripture who God uses as instruments for His bidding, remain guilty of their sin because of their evil intent, their motivation for selling Joseph was purely evil and they must bear the consequences for that which they had done. On the other hand, God used their evil

intent for His good purpose and to bring this about, He actively governed their evil and permitted them to fulfill their sinful purpose while at the same time using it to bring about the ultimate good that He had intended.

We see this again in Acts 2:22-23 where Peter said: *“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”* Christ’s crucifixion by the hands of men was an evil act with evil motives. It was driven by the Hebrew religious elite’s intention to rid themselves of Jesus, and Pilates evil intent to placate the Jews and to limit the risk of provoking Caesar’s wrath that would have stemmed from the real threat of an impending riot. But we must remember that this was a part of God’s purpose for the salvation of His people and we read in Isaiah 53:10 *“Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush Him; He has put Him to grief”*, and God used the evil of those who crucified Christ as a means for Jesus to pay the penalty that assuaged God’s righteous anger and then for Him to conquer death on the third day when He rose from the grave just as He said He would. In addition, it allowed for His ascension to the right hand of God where He continues to mediate on our behalf, as well as having prepared the way to send another helper that would indwell His chosen people for their ultimate good and God’s glory.

We struggle with comprehending or even beginning to understand the subtleties of God’s providence, but no matter how we try, we cannot know all that He has set forth for His glory. In Isaiah 55:8 we are taught that God said: *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.”* A reading of the book of Job will testify to God’s glorious sovereignty over all matters and even though Job had no understanding as to why all that happened came about, he remained faithful and declared: *“Though He slay me, I will hope in Him (Job 13:15).”*

“1 Thessalonians 2:12, Paul says that God calls us into His kingdom and to His glory. The Lord is referred to in 1 Timothy 1:17 as the *“King of the ages,”* with honor and glory being ascribed to Him in that passage, and we know that the glory of God is always found expressed within His sovereign reign over all things. First Chronicles 29:11

includes David's song of praise in which he ascribes to God both glory and kingly reign over creation. Because God is glorious, He is sovereign over all things. Because God is sovereign over all things, He is glorious. We cannot separate any attribute of His character, and one of the reasons that the complete sovereignty of God is emphasized over every detail of creation is because His glory is to be emphasized. God is most glorified by us when we ascribe to Him full control over all things, even our salvation".¹

We may not fully grasp the outworking of God's sovereignty or how He uses secondary means to accomplish His will, but it is incumbent on us to fully take hold of and to affirm His promises that are linked together in what is called the golden chain which can be found in Romans 8:28-30. In these verses we are blessed to read: *"...that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified"*. In this revelation of His divine will for us as His children we should rejoice as it is in these promises that we will find comfort and solace for our troubled minds.

God's Sovereignty in election is a choice that is made by God alone. It is where God chooses a people or a person and bestows upon them the benefits of salvation and gifts them with the ability to carry out God's purposes in the world. Different people within the body of the church may receive a variety of different gifts, but it is never to result in any form of disunity. This can be seen in the Triune Godhead which is comprised of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, where we find that although they share the same Divine essence, they are different persons and have different roles in accomplishing their unified will for our lives. It is our duty to glorify God in properly understanding our gifting and to use those gifts to further His work all the while united as one body as we hold fast to the doctrinal guidelines found within the Scriptural mandates that are nothing less than the Word of God. It is wholly within God's prerogative, according to His

¹ This paragraph is a paraphrase of several excerpts from *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., December 8, 2017)

perfect wisdom, sovereign plan, and purpose, to bestow differing gifts and talents to each of us as He wills. It is our duty to develop those gifts and in turn bless others with the fruit of our having been gifted. It should go without saying that the gifting that we as individual Christians have been given is to be used for the sake of the common good of the church as a whole. 1 Corinthians 12:8-11 captures the truth of these words in a way that only God's Word can.

The most precious gift to God's people is in their sovereign election which was foreordained from eternity past and before His divine act of creating the world. 2 Peter 1:3-10 clearly spells out the doctrine of election where we read: *"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities, you will never fall."*

In Titus 1 Paul says that he was commanded by God our Savior, for the sake of the elect, to preach the promises of His word which He promised from before the ages began. He also admonishes us in Colossians 3:12 to: *"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience..."* And again in 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5a we read: *"For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction".*

These passages reference sovereign election and Jesus taught Nicodemus that unless he was born again that he would not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. What Jesus was relating to Nicodemus was the impossibility for any man to accomplish it on their own. In John MacArthur's book, 'None Other', he points out that to speak using analogies and parables was a normal part of spiritual discourse, and that Nicodemus would have understood Jesus' analogy. MacArthur continues by saying that Nicodemus knew that he had to start all over again, that he needed a new life, that he needed to be regenerated.

Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee, but he was a teacher, a Rabbi. He would have been well versed in the Old Testament and so Jesus points him to Ezekiel's prophesy of the New Covenant found in Ezekiel 36:25-27; *"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."*

Jesus is the living water, and whoever drinks from the water that He gives will never thirst again (John 4:10,14). In His alluding to Ezekiel, Jesus was teaching Nicodemus that he needed to be cleansed of his unrighteousness, be given a new heart, and that he must be filled with the Holy Spirit. These are the requirements that must be in place to be born again, and these can only come to pass if God the Father had pre-destined them to be. This is sovereign election, and it is not by any works of our own, but by the monergistic work of God alone that we are saved. To be born again, to be regenerated and to start a new life in Christ is a Spiritual awakening, an initial opening of your new heart of flesh that can only come through the divine prerogative of our merciful God.

Praise God who, through His sovereign will at the point of our regeneration, instilled within us the faith to believe so that the Holy Spirit could quicken us as He begins to work in and through us in the process of our sanctification in order to make us more and more Christ like as we progress in our walk with Him. As Christians we put our hope and trust in Him, and that hope is an assured expectation that His promises will be

fulfilled, that His sacrifice, death, resurrection, ascension, and ongoing mediation on our behalf will bring us to our final glory and to our eternal worship of Him in our heavenly home.

Prior to this monergistic work we were dead in our sins and trespasses, unable to save ourselves, at enmity with God and pitifully lacking any vestige of desire to know Him. Man must be born again to become spiritually alive and to have ears to hear the effectual call of our Creator which results in a transformation within our hearts and minds as our wills begin to conform to His and our lives are forever changed for His glory.

“John 6:44 tells us that the Father draws people to Christ and that no one can come to Christ unless the Father draws him. Ephesians 2:10 explains that we are “*created in Christ Jesus*.” Paul is clearly talking about the re-creating work of God in that text, so we see that regeneration happens “in” the Son of God as the Father draws us and the Holy Spirit breathes new life into us.”²

It bears repeating, our having been drawn to a new life in Christ is the elective work of God alone. No one can come to a saving faith in Christ without having been called to Jesus. Once we have been called and imbued with the faith to believe, the Holy Spirit sovereignly transforms our souls, bringing us to full spiritual life. God not only enables us to choose Jesus, but His effectual calling also assures that we will choose Him. One author in Table Talk Magazine, (January 25, 2021), said that in God’s monergistic work of regeneration, we are not born again because we trust Jesus; we trust Jesus because we are born again.

Saul of Tarsus is a perfect example of the regenerating work of God. There is no way, on his own, that he would have had such a transformative and radical change from his zealous life as a Pharisee and the intense vehemence he exhibited while persecuting Christians to his miraculous conversion and becoming a chosen instrument, a

² Paraphrased from *Tabletalk Magazine* (Sanford, FL, Ligonier Ministries, Inc., August 28, 2018).

messenger of God as an Apostle, and one of the greatest proponents of Christ's teachings and way of living.

God is sovereign in His election and the regeneration of those He has mercifully chosen, and because He is sovereign in His election, He is also sovereign in one's eternal salvation. This is good news for us because it means God never fails to save those whom He has chosen. And it also means that we can only ascribe glory to the Lord God Almighty for our redemption. God's gospel is life affirming news for us, and we find in passages such as Zephaniah 3:14–20 that we are to joyfully sing out our praises because of the work that He has done. In addition, not only are we to glorify the Lord in our adoration of Him, but we also find in verse 17 that our God, who has graciously saved us, is ever-present with us and that He rejoices over us with gladness and through His Spirit He will calm us with His love, and we know that this blessing of tranquility brings to us a quiet peace that is beyond all understanding. He has saved us, and in doing so through Christ's atoning work, we no longer have to fear His judgment of wrath because we are now clothed in the righteousness of Christ who has taken our sins upon Himself and has paid the ultimate price for our iniquities.

The sovereignty of God is so all encompassing that this brief treatise does not begin to adequately relay the veracity of the fullness of its meaning. God is sovereign over all things and that truth is practically beyond the human mind's capability of comprehension and therefore we must live by faith that it is so. Praise Him that He is sovereign because Scripture tells us in Jeremiah 10:23 that: *"I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps"*, Proverbs 16:9; and 21:1 echo this as we read: *"The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps,"* and that *"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever he will."* We are continuously in need of God's sovereign guidance to direct our paths in all that we say, think, or do.