

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

11 What Is Meant by the Sovereignty of God?

Scripture: Ephesians 1:3-12

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind of intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of HIS will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.”

INTRODUCTION

One of the great truths contained in the Bible is that which has to do with the sovereignty of God. It is a concept that God has been pleased to, reveal to us, and is therefore not a product of man's mind or imagination. The truth of the sovereignty of God is normally approached in the classrooms of colleges and seminaries and for that reason the average Christian attaches only a passing interest to the matter. Other reasons for neglect have to do with apprehension and appreciation. There is no question that it requires a great deal of effort to attempt even a partial understanding of the sovereignty of God. Much searching, gathering, and comparing of Scripture is required in order to set forth the doctrine in an orderly and reasonable way. Congregations of God's people can be thankful to the Lord when He sends Spirit anointed teachers into their midst to instruct them in this matter which brings comfort into their lives. Correctly perceived, there is no truth about God designed more to bring courage and a sense of security to the believer than the doctrine of God's sovereignty. Thus, it is not for the beginner or novice to lay hold here if the treatment is to receive its proper balance and dimension. So, I say, it is a hard truth, and much industry is needed to lay hold of it. But, it is good Bible truth, and God has given His Spirit to

help us in understanding this truth in a practical and helpful way. The hungry believer should be ready and pleased to receive all that God has revealed, even if a price has to be paid. I am grateful to the man who brought Proverbs 23:23 to my attention years ago *“Buy the truth and sell it not, get wisdom and instruction and understanding.”* The formula seems plain enough, no understanding for those who are not up to paying the price.

Furthermore, the word “sovereign” may have unpleasant connotations for us. The Apostles' Creed, in its earliest appearance, goes back to the first half of the Second Century. Believers, having been instructed in the faith, would go into the waters of baptism with the words, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth...” It may be difficult for us to think of God in those terms in these days living in the kind of world we do. How can such tragedy befall so many if there is a good God who is “almighty?” In addition, we do not like to think of anyone being all that supreme. Our experience of those who have that kind of power has not been good. History shows that men with too much authority are almost certain to misuse it. So, there are these difficulties with such a subject, and many have felt it more convenient to avoid it altogether. The result is that the God of the Bible is virtually unknown. We ought not to dishonor Him in that way. This common degeneracy of the times should not shape our thoughts of God. Let us try to appreciate more of God's sovereignty under the following headings

I. ITS DEFINITION:

The sovereignty of God has been defined as the exercise of His omnipotence by which He rules His entire creation. Sovereignty is thus not an attribute of God as much as it is the exercise of that quality we know as omnipotence. Simply stated, God has all the power there is to have. He is not limited. He is not controlled by any outside force or being. He is infinitely elevated over every creature. God does what He pleases, when He pleases, how He pleases. There is nothing to thwart Him. *“My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure.”* (Isa.46:10) The Apostle Paul writes, *“...according to the purpose of Him who works all things after the counsel of His will.”* (Ephesians 1:11) The Book of Daniel states, *“He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay His hand.”* (4:35) This does not imply that God's activities are capricious and we are to hold our breath wondering what He will do next. God always acts within the structure of His perfections. This means there are things which God cannot do. He cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18), look upon iniquity (Habakkuk 1:13), deny Himself (II Timothy 2:13) or commit sin (James 1:13). Neither can He make nonsense into sense. He cannot make a tree which is

completely green and purple at the same time, a square circle, or a room temperature at 30 degrees and 86 degrees simultaneously. God is not a magician. He is capable of doing everything which can be done outside of the self contradictory.

II. ITS REALMS:

The Christian faith teaches that God not only created the universe in which we live, but that as a wise, benevolent, and almighty being, He preserves and upholds all He has made. His sovereign control over all things is known as Providence. By it we mean that God's superintendence causes all events to work toward His purposes. We have an imperial Potentate revealed in the Bible regardless of the many who will not admit to His lofty place. *"But our God is in the heavens: He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased."* (Psalm 115:3)

1. God Sovereignly Controls the Physical Universe:

The sunshine, winds, rain, snow, etc. are all of His bidding. (Psalm 103:19; Job 9:5-7; Psalm 147:16-18; Matthew 5:45; Acts 14:17) God employs these elements as expressions of His goodness and love while at the same time He has chosen and ordained that man's evil shall work for sorrow, tragedy and loss through the destructive force of the elements.

2. God Sovereignly Controls All Creature Life:

There are many passages in Scripture which tell of God's rule over the beast of the field and the birds. This should not be explained away as a poetical means of expressing this vast truth. These creatures depend on His constant care. (Job 12:10; Psalm 104:21, 28-29; 147:9; Matthew 6:26; 10:29)

3. God Sovereignly Controls the Destiny of Nations:

The Book of Job states, *"He increaseth the nations, and He destroyeth them; He enlargeth the nations and He leadeth them captive."* (12:23) Just as, God did sovereignly, place Adam in the garden as it pleased Him, so whole nations rise and fall under His will. The Bible clearly states, *"for the kingdom is Jehovah's: and He is ruler over the nations."* (Psalm 22:28) Other references are: Psalm 66:7; 75:6-7; Isaiah 10:5-7; Daniel 4:25; Acts 17:26; Romans 13:1.

4. God Sovereignly Controls Our Lives:

This supremacy touches our birth and death. Acts 17:25; 17:28), our successes and failures (Psalm 75:6-7), the details of our lives (Proverbs 16:33; Matthew 10:30) and our future destinies (Psalm 73:24; 37:23-24; Ephesians 1:10-11; Romans 9:18)

5. God Sovereignly Controls the Supply of Our Needs:

I am sure you are familiar with the words of Philippians 4:19, *“My God shall supply every need of yours in Christ Jesus.”* Psalm 73:24 reads, *“In peace will I both lay me down and sleep; for thou, Jehovah, alone makest me dwell in safety.”*

6. God Sovereignly Controls the Limits: (Extent and Effects of Evil)

The evil acts of the creature as well as of Satan are under the control of God. Job 1:12 reads, *“And Jehovah said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power, only upon himself put not forth thy hand.”* (Psalm 124:2; I Corinthians 10:13; II Thessalonians 2:7; Revelation 20:2-3)

Here, then, is a brief sketch of the realms of God's sovereignty as they are openly displayed before mankind. Divine sovereignty means that God is on the throne of the universe. He is subject to none. This is the true Godhood of God. The word “almighty” ought to have a less frightening sound once we become more familiar with how the word is employed in Scripture. It does not have to do with an irresponsible tyrant or playboy who brandishes His power for the fun of it. He is at all times a good God. No matter how startling and unexpected an event may be, for the believer, it is done out of God's goodness and love. *“All things are working together for good to them who love God.”* (Romans 8:28) However, there are not a few difficulties which have to do with God's, sovereignty.

III. ITS PROBLEMS:

One of the great problems with which we have to do is the problem of evil. If God is the Creator of all things, He must have created evil and be in control of it now. I should have formed that statement as a question because it most often appears that way. Did God create evil and does he uphold it? Let us remember that evil is not a positive entity, it is rather, a privation of what is perfect or positive. God created every positive entity, He created all things good. He did not produce those privations of perfection which we call evil. God does not cause the absence of that which should be there.

1. The Problem of Evil:

The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks about the Sovereignty of God with these words; “God from all eternity, did by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.” This is a good statement concerning the very matter it is impossible for us to understand. How can God ordain whatever comes to pass and not be the author of evil? It is at this point that the Christian system must claim

mystery. This is an antinomy. An antinomy exists when there is the appearance of a contradiction between two conclusions which are themselves equally logical, reasonable and necessary. Both the existence of God and evil are facts. Inasmuch as they are facts they are not entirely incompatible, though their complete reconciliation is not possible to the human mind. Some people like to go under the assumption that we must be capable of understanding all things. They do this even in spite of the fact that all history shows the infinite ability the mind has to go astray. The sensible person refuses to deny God or evil. He has the humility and the faith which will serve God in the midst of the unanswerable without moans and groans.

Some have sought to explain this mystery by speaking of God's positive and permissive will. He positively wills that men will be holy but permits their acts of unholiness which will serve His ultimate purposes. Genesis 4:5 deals with Joseph and his brothers as they sold him into slavery. Their act was an unholy act; however, years later Joseph said to them, *"Now therefore, be not grieved nor angry with yourselves that you sold me hither; for God did send me before you to preserve life."* In Genesis 50:20 we read, *"But for you, you thought evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive."* This was true of the ultimate evil, that of the crucifixion of Christ. In Acts 2:23 we read, *"Him (Christ) being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain."* The act, was very evil, but it was permitted by God and was under His sovereign power. God does not will evil, but having made men free, He permitted it and its consequences. This permission was a less serious thing than would have been had man been deprived of his freedom. As I have said earlier privations of perfection never were the object of God's creative activity, God is not the cause of the absence of perfection. This is a thorny problem which has baffled the keenest minds for centuries. Its solution goes beyond the confines of limited human reason. We must trust Scripture and be assured: *"God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man."* (James,1:13) God cannot sin. God is not the author of evil.

2. The Problem of Man's Free Will:

The Bible teaches that God is sovereign in the matter of personal salvation. In John 6:65 Jesus taught, *"Therefore said I unto you that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father."* (See also Ephesians 1:4-5; I Peter 2:4) At the same time the Scripture acknowledges the will of the creature as being responsible to God. Peter speaks of crucifying Christ with wicked hands. (Acts 2:23) Although God's providence extends to all things

from a general point of view, that same providence has willed that within the universe there should be a vast series of secondary causes affecting each other. Among these is the person God has made a free agent. Man does not have to act a certain way because God knows beforehand he will. Knowledge does not cause things to happen. Things which happen give birth to knowledge of them, not visa versa. Secondly, if men were not free they could not be responsible for their conduct, neither to merit commendation nor condemnation for their actions. Unfortunately we will have to break in our study and continue another time.

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